ELLERY QUEEN

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

May 1986
$1.95 U.S.
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This message is one in a series from America's magazines.

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THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN®

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Executive Secretary
of the Mystery Writers of America

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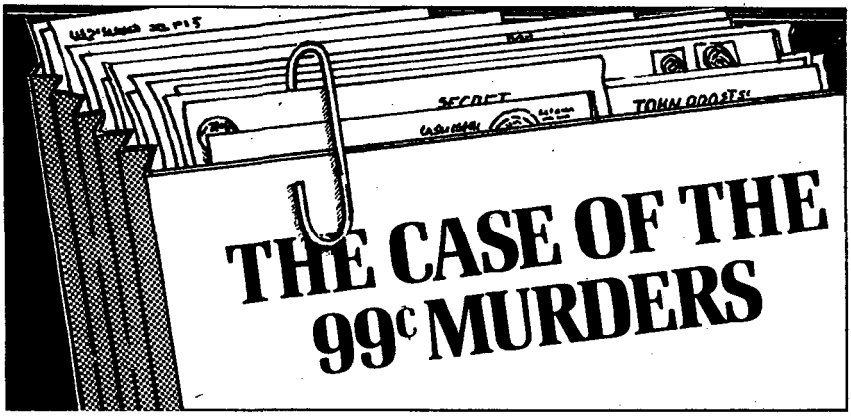

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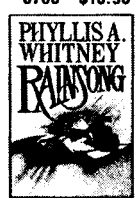

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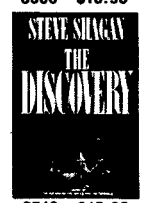

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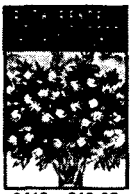

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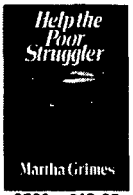

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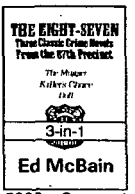

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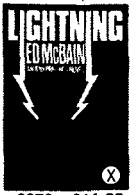

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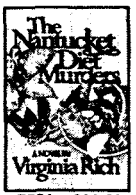

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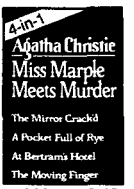

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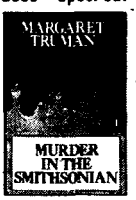

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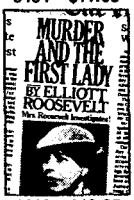

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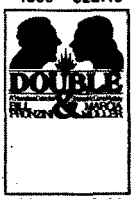

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a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"That barn is all that remains of the original Prando farm," Michael said. "You can see the remains of the house foundation nearby. When the Gypsies met here in the early days of the war, it would have been a thriving farm."

"How do you know the Nazis never found the treasure?" said Captain Segar.

"Someone would have known. It wasn't the sort of thing the Nazis would keep secret. More likely they would have announced it as a great triumph over our people."

"More to the point, how are you so certain there ever was a treasure?"

Michael shook his head. "When a Gypsy tells another Gypsy there is a treasure, you can be sure of it. We may lie to outsiders, but not among ourselves. The Gypsy code is very strict . . ."

THE GYPSY TREASURE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Captain Segar's usual job was law enforcement in the cities and towns that bordered the Transylvanian Alps in central Romania. He disliked the Communist politicians one encountered all too frequently in Bucharest and for that reason he usually managed to steer clear of his nation's capital. However, the November conciliation meeting required the presence of a Gypsy leader, along with representatives of other ethnic groups, and so Segar accompanied his friend Michael Vlado to the gathering.

Michael was even more ill at ease than Segar in the streets of the city, longing for the quiet of his little village of Gravita. He wasn't

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a nomadic Gypsy by nature, but a settled one, descended from a line of cattle drovers who had made Romania their home for more than a century. He had a wife and family back in Gravita and he was anxious to return to them.

It was on the second day of the two-day meeting that Captain Segar saw a Gypsy woman approach Michael in the hotel lobby and hand him a message. He seemed startled to see her and tried to say something, but she retreated as quickly as she had come.

"Who was that?" Segar asked as Michael stood reading the message he'd been handed.

"The daughter of an old Gypsy king," Michael replied. "She brings me news of the death of her uncle."

"I'm sorry."

Michael nodded acknowledgment. "There is a Gypsy festival in Oradea this weekend and tribes from all over Europe will be there. I had hoped to see Greystone at it." He pondered the message for a moment and then folded it into his pocket.

"You will not be returning to Gravita, then?" Segar asked.

"No, I must go to Oradea for the festival."

"That's almost to the Hungarian border!"

"It must be," Michael answered simply.

He seemed troubled and distant for the remainder of the day. In the late afternoon, when the time came to depart, Segar found him alone in the lobby. "How will you get to Oradea?" he asked. They'd made the trip to Bucharest in Segar's official car.

"I can go by train," Michael answered. After a moment he added, "Unless you would be able to accompany me."

"Me? I must be back to work on Monday."

"But your weekend is free?"

"Well, I suppose so," Segar admitted.

"I would appreciate it if you could accompany me. There may be a need for your services."

"My official services? Oradea is outside my district."

"But as a captain of the security forces you would have authority to act in the absence of local police."

"What is it that troubles you so, Michael?"

"Greystone, the Gypsy who died, was murdered. It happened just a few miles from the festival site at Oradea. There could be further violence at the festival."

"I will accompany you," Segar decided reluctantly. "But I need more details."

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"There will be plenty of time to talk on the way," Michael said.

The journey was a long one, some three hundred miles by road through the mountains. The border city was in a valley given over to fields of wheat and corn. It was in a meadow south of the city that the Gypsy festival would be held.

"Oradea is much smaller than Bucharest," Segar noted as they drove through the night on the last leg of the journey. "There are few of the modern buildings one sees in the capital."

"We will not be going into the city itself."

"Tell me about the man who died."

"Though he was called Greystone, his real name was Zuloaga. His brother Konrad Zuloaga is a Gypsy king—it was Konrad's daughter Livia who brought me the message at the hotel."

"How did Greystone die?"

"Stabbed to death as soon as he arrived in Oradea. It was made to look like a knife fight, but his brother is convinced it was a carefully planned killing."

"Why do you believe there may be more violence? Is it a feud between rival Gypsy tribes?"

"No, not in the way you mean. To explain it, I must tell you about the Second World War and about the treasure of the Gypsies."

"Don't all Gypsies have a hidden treasure?" Segar asked, recalling old legends.

"This is treasure of a more modern sort. As you know, many Gypsies died in Nazi concentration camps along with the Jews. In some cases, entire tribes were wiped out. The Gypsies of Hungary and Romania, realizing they were doomed, banded together to keep their gold and jewelry from falling into the hands of the Nazis. This so-called treasure was hidden somewhere in the area of Oradea and its whereabouts was entrusted to five men, each of whom was given a portion of the secret."

"But the war has been over for forty years!"

"What is forty years when measured as part of eternity? The original owners of the treasure died in the camps. Others didn't know quite what should be done with it. Finally, the cards were consulted, and the other oracles that my people rely upon. It was decided that the treasure should be recovered this year, on this first November weekend, and so the festival was planned."

"It's getting a bit chilly for an outdoor festival. You'll remember there was snow in Gravita two weeks ago."

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"Only a flurry. And this area is warmer, being in a valley."

"What of the five who know the treasure's location? Are you one of them?"

"Hardly. I wasn't even born until after the war had started. As you know, I was named for the young King Michael who ruled from 1940 until the Communists forced him to abdicate in nineteen forty-seven."

Segar nodded. "A good man, even though his father was a Fascist."

"No, I wasn't one of the five," Michael continued, "but I have known them all. Two are dead now."

"Greystone is one of them?"

"Yes. And whoever killed him may have taken his portion of the secret."

"What is it—a map divided into five pieces?"

"No one knows. Except the five."

"What about the other one who died?"

"A natural death, some years ago. The secret passed to his son."

Captain Segar pondered the information as he drove. "Why do you expect more violence?"

"The so-called treasure, if it really exists at all, must be worth a large fortune. Even my fellow Gypsies are not above killing for money, and now that blood has been spilled more may follow. The idea of the festival bothered me from the beginning. Why not assemble only the five? Why bring in five hundred?"

They'd driven through most of the night, stopping only to sleep for a few hours along the road. Now, as the first gentle streaks of dawn appeared in the east, Segar rounded a bend in the road and saw in the distance the first wagons of the Gypsy encampment. "We're here," he told Michael.

Many of the Gypsies had come in campers and house trailers, but a surprising number of traditional horse-drawn wagons were in evidence, too. Though it was barely dawn, there was evidence of activity at the camp. Fires were going and breakfast was being prepared.

"They're setting up the fortune-telling booths already," Segar observed.

"It is their livelihood, after all," said Michael.

They parked the car off the road and strolled among the campers, several of whom shouted greetings to Michael. Even over breakfast some of the men were playing cards, betting small amounts of money on Austrian tarok or American poker, sometimes mixing English

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phrases with their Romany speech. Near one of the wagons a young Gypsy was practicing on his violin.

"There will be music and dancing," Michael said, "and card games and fortune telling—all designed to separate the local people from their money in one way or another." He led the way to a large mobile home at the back of the encampment. A woman opened the door as they approached and Captain Segar recognized the Gypsy who'd delivered the message to Michael in Bucharest. She was more attractive close up than he'd first supposed. A single golden earring through her left earlobe balanced a cascade of black hair on the right side of her head.

"Ah, Livia! You're done up in fine style for the townsfolk."

"Thank you," she told Michael with a smile. "Will you stay to see my dance?"

"That depends on your father."

She escorted them into the vehicle, where a grey-haired Gypsy sat across the table from a younger man in traditional farmer's overalls. The Gypsy rose, smiling, to welcome Michael. "I was afraid you would not come, Michael. We need your sage advice. But you have brought someone with you."

"Konrad, this is Captain Segar, a friend and traveling companion."

"A captain of police?"

"He is on holiday. Captain, this is Konrad Zuloaga, a king much beloved by his people."

Zuloaga in turn introduced his guest. "Rudolph Fuhl, who has the farm across the road."

Fuhl, a man in his thirties, shook hands with a powerful grip. "I was surprised to see so many vehicles arriving during the night. When King Zuloaga wrote me of this gathering, I understood only five Gypsies and their families would attend."

"It has turned into a festival," Zuloaga acknowledged. "We will be gone by Monday and the countryside will be peaceful once more. In the meantime, bring your family and enjoy it."

"Is this your property?" Michael asked the farmer.

"It's state property. All this area belonged to a great-uncle named Prando during the war. He was killed in a bombing raid and the state seized it. My father was allowed to keep farming his portion across the road. Of course, all arable land was nationalized in nineteen sixty-two, so now I have only a half-acre plot for private use."

Michael nodded. "Such is the case in Gravita as well. But if this is state property, why are you concerned?"

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"There will be trouble and the authorities will come. There is always trouble when there are Gypsies."

"There will be no trouble," Konrad Zuloaga assured him. "You have my word for it. Livia, escort Mr. Fuhl to the road." Then, perhaps aware of the suddenness of the dismissal, he repeated, "Bring your family over later for the festival, Mr. Fuhl. I'm sure they will enjoy it."

"Thank you," the farmer said. "I might do that."

When they were alone, Zuloaga relaxed a bit and turned to Michael. "I feel better with you here. The four are meeting this afternoon to compare clues to the treasure's location. After the killing of Greystone, I fear what might happen."

"Was his clue to the treasure taken from him?"

"Yes."

"You still have yours?"

"Of course. For more than forty years I have guarded it."

"You and your brother. A third keeper of the secret, the crippled Gypsy, one-eyed Heron, died of natural causes more than a decade ago."

Zuloaga nodded. "His son Radu is here with that portion of the secret."

"And the other two?"

"Kings in their own right—old Cuza of the Wanderers and a man who should be king, the English Gypsy, Reynard."

"I have heard of Reynard but never met him," Michael said.

"Some find him too sly, too disdainful of the old Gypsy customs, but he has kept the secret for all these years along with the others. We were only five boys at the time, some of us still in our teens, and the secret given to us changed our lives. I would say that old Cuza is a king today because he was one of the treasure's guardians. Perhaps that is true of me as well."

"The five of you were chosen at random?"

"Young men were picked who might have a chance of escaping the Nazi roundup by fleeing crosscountry. It was a wise choice, obviously, since four of us made good our escape. Heron was caught by the Nazis near the Swiss border and brutally treated. His experience in the camps left him a one-eyed cripple, but he survived. After the war, he married a Gypsy woman he'd met in the camp and fathered Radu. The treasure clue passed to Radu when his father died."

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"He was able to keep the clue with him all through the camps?"

"By its very nature it is easily hidden," Konrad Zuloaga said. "You will see soon enough. I want you to be here this afternoon, at two o'clock." He glanced at Captain Segar. "Your friend, too, if you wish."

Michael nodded. "I do wish. Captain Segar is a man of the law, but one who respects the way of the Gypsy."

"Bring him, then."

"You believe the killer of your brother will be among those present?"

"It is possible."

Livia returned from escorting Fuhl out of the encampment. She was laughing and full of high spirits. "Everything is ready for the festival."

"The farmer is gone?"

She nodded. "He is so frightened of our people! He thought one of Cuza's daughters gave him the evil eye." The thought made her laugh anew.

"Captain Segar and I will be leaving now," Michael said. "We will return at two o'clock."

Some people from the city had already driven out for the festival, though the hour was early. The fortune-telling booths were attracting the largest crowd, but some of the men had already strolled over to watch the Gypsy dancers. "King Zuloaga seems so stern and dignified," Segar observed, "yet we step out of his trailer and see all this."

"There are many tribes represented here. Some still relish the old Gypsy ways. We should enjoy it while it lasts—the tide of history is running against the wanderer."

They strolled past dark-skinned women in colorful scarves, past gambling games and tarot readings. The music of the Gypsy violins grew louder and seemed to drive the last morning clouds from the sky. With the sun came a warmth more like August than November. "A beautiful day, Michael," said Segar.

"It is." He paused at the edge of the encampment to study a weathered barn some hundred yards away. "That barn is all that remains of the original Prando farm. You can see the remains of the house foundation nearby. When the Gypsies met here in the early days of the war, it would have been a thriving farm."

"How do you know the Nazis never found the treasure?"

"Someone would have known. It wasn't the sort of thing the Nazis

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would keep secret. More likely they would have announced it as a great triumph over our people."

"More to the point, how are you so certain there ever was a treasure?"

Michael shook his head. "When a Gypsy tells another Gypsy there is a treasure, you can be sure of it. We may lie to outsiders, but not among ourselves. The Gypsy code is very strict. Livia, the king's daughter, was married once. Her husband divorced her for sleeping with another man. Under Gypsy law, he could have killed her. Yet if she had taken money from her lover it would not have been considered adultery."

"Amazing."

"Another example—Gypsy children are never beaten by their parents. It is considered a greater crime to beat one's children than to beat one's parents—"

Someone called Michael's name and they were joined by a rough-looking man in his thirties. He had a knife scar on one cheek and an insolent manner that Segar disliked at once. "Michael, you have surely lowered yourself to attend our festival! What brings you all the way from Gravita?"

"Hello, Radu. This is Captain Segar, my friend."

"You travel with the police these days?"

"When necessary. You are here to do your father's duty?"

The man's face twisted into a humorless grin. "I am here to claim his share of the treasure."

"The treasure came from all of us. It belongs to all of us."

"Oh, no—not my father's share. He was tortured by the Nazis and managed to survive. But his life was crippled and shortened by the experience. I am owed his share of this treasure and Konrad Zuloaga will not keep it from me."

"We have to find it first," Michael reminded him.

"It will be found." Radu started away.

"This afternoon will tell," Michael said.

When they'd walked on, Segar commented, "A disagreeable man. He is Radu Heron, possessor of his father's share of the secret?"

"Correct. Of the secret, not of the treasure."

Captain Segar spotted Livia running through the crowd, pausing to joke with one of the violin players. "You said her husband divorced her for adultery. Is he here today?"

"You have just met him," Michael replied. "She was married to

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Radu Heron. It was her lover who gave Radu that scar, before Radu killed him."

Toward noon, they decided to eat and Segar followed Michael to a modern camping vehicle of British manufacture. The man they met there was unlike any of the other Gypsies Segar knew. Tall and slim, he had the look of a handsome, suntanned Englishman, the sort Segar imagined one met at polo matches. It was only when Reynard spoke that a trace of his Gypsy heritage surfaced.

"Captain Segar—so pleased to meet you! Back in England, some of my best friends are members of the police. I look forward to chatting with you after the day's business is completed."

He had traveled to Oradea with a blonde Englishwoman somewhat younger than his sixty-odd years. Her name was Charlotte and she kept to the background, casting occasional apprehensive looks in Segar's direction. Michael had never met Reynard before, but each of them knew of the other. Unlike Zuloaga and old Cuza, Reynard had not aspired to a kingship among the Gypsies. He had become another person, of another tribe, and he made it clear that this visit back to his past was not pleasant for him.

"Have you seen Cuza?" Michael asked. "Or Konrad Zuloaga? The son of Heron is here, too."

"These are but names from the past to me, Michael. Charlotte and I have a different life in England. I do not live as a Gypsy there." He smiled a bit. "Except perhaps for a weekend's camping."

Charlotte served a light lunch of food they'd brought with them. There was no trace of Gypsy cuisine here, only traditional British dishes. Segar found the lunch appetizing enough, if a trifle bland for his taste. After they'd finished, Michael took his leave. "You'll be at Zuloaga's at two?"

"I'll be there," Reynard assured them. "And once I'm rid of my part in this confounded secret, the rest of you can keep the treasure or do whatever you want with it."

They left the camper and continued on across the encampment toward Zuloaga's mobile home. There were more townspeople now, strolling among the trucks and wagons, stopping to admire a horse or buy a scarf or wager a few lei on a game of chance. Segar could merely shake his head. "The local police should be here. There's thievery all around us."

"Remember you're on a holiday," Michael chided him.

"Are we going to see the other one now? Old Cuza?"

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"It's getting close to two o'clock. We'll see him at the meeting."

Livia poured six goblets of wine for the group and then vanished into a bedroom as Radu Heron and Reynard arrived. They sat at a round table with Konrad Zuloaga while Michael and Segar took seats to one side. "What is the policeman doing here?" Radu wanted to know, scowling at Segar across the table.

"He's here at my request," Zuloaga said. "My brother is dead, possibly because of the treasure. I want no more killing here."

"A bodyguard for a Gypsy king!" Radu scoffed. "When I am king, I will defend *myself*."

"I forgive your tongue," Zuloaga told him, "because your father suffered for his people."

Reynard was restless. "Where is old Cuza?" he asked. "Let's get this business behind us."

"Cuza is an ill man," Zuloaga said. "He was the oldest of us back then, you'll remember. The oldest of the five. I visited him for lunch and he gave me his share of the secret, in this envelope, in case he is not able to attend. His daughters are caring for him."

Their eyes went to the envelope Konrad Zuloaga held in his hand. "Let's get on with it, then," Reynard insisted, reaching into his own pocket. "Here's my portion." He tossed a worn playing card onto the table. It was the eight of hearts, and across the face of it was written, in faded ink, the words *Prando Farm, Oradea*.

"Interesting," Zuloaga commented. "It is the card for thoughts of marriage in fortune telling." He opened the envelope by ripping one end of it. "Here is Cuza's contribution."

It was another playing card, the eight of clubs.

"An accident," Michael said softly from the sidelines, giving the Gypsy meaning.

Konrad Zuloaga nodded. "And my card—the eight of diamonds. It suggests a jewel."

They sat staring at the three eights. All the cards were from the same deck, with a faded Albanian flag on the back, its black two-headed eagle poised against a red background. And all had the words *Prando Farm, Oradea* scrawled across the face of the card in the same handwriting.

"That was our father," Konrad said, noting Michael's perusal of the cards. "It was a deck he always carried with him. We sat in this very field as he chose my brother and me, and Reynard and Heron and Cuza. He wrote that on each of the cards he chose, without

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letting any of us see the others' cards. He told us to travel far, and always keep the cards with us, because when we were reunited they would tell us the location of the Gypsy treasure."

All eyes were on Radu Heron now, and Michael said, "Show us your father's card, Radu. Show us the fourth eight."

Radu spit on the floor and tossed his card onto the table. It had been folded twice, apparently so it could be hidden in a small space. But it was not the eight of spades everyone expected.

It was the six of diamonds.

"Beware of speculation," Konrad Zuloaga said with a chuckle. "A card with a special meaning to a speculator like Michael."

"I guessed wrong," Michael admitted.

"Three eights and a six," Reynard said. "Most interesting. But what about the fifth card?"

"My brother had it with him when he was killed," Konrad replied. "His murderer took it."

"It might not be three eights and a six at all," Michael pointed out. "It could be two diamonds, a heart, and a club."

"Do you wish to deduce its meaning?" Konrad challenged.

"That's difficult without the fifth card, especially since the geographic features of the farm might have changed in forty years. But two of you were here then. Tell me about this place, Reynard and Konrad."

It was Reynard who answered first. "I remember a big farm, well equipped for its time. You can still see the foundation where the main house stood. There was the barn, and a horse barn, and some other buildings. A silo. I remember especially a huge old oak tree that stood in a far corner of the field, marking one corner of the boundary. The farm was bigger then, on both sides of the road, and more than a dozen Gypsies worked here. Even then, they settled down and stopped wandering, like many Gypsies of Eastern Europe."

Konrad Zuloaga took up the story. "It was my father who gathered up the gold and jewelry when we saw what was happening to the Gypsies. There was a great deal of it. I remember it filling half the back of a truck. We never saw what they did with it, but it was hidden somewhere on this farm. And the clues were given to the five of us. We were never to show each other our cards until all of us had gathered here again. That was to take more than forty years for a variety of reasons."

"Your father must have felt that the hiding place of the treasure

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would become obvious once the five playing cards were seen together," Michael said.

"But we need the fifth card," Radu insisted. "These four mean nothing by themselves."

Reynard cleared his throat. "They may mean less than nothing. Have you considered the possibility that one of us may have substituted a fake card for the real one?"

"What would that gain?" Michael asked.

"One of us would know the true location of the treasure while the others were kept in the dark. One of us could come and steal it away."

"The treasure is for the common good of all Rom peoples," Konrad Zuloaga insisted.

"The hell it is!" Radu growled, his anger building once more. "It belongs to the five, and one-fifth of it is mine, as my father's son. You are so noble-sounding about the Rom people, but it is you who had the best opportunity to switch one of the playing cards—or even two! How do we know that eight of clubs is really old Cuza's card?"

"You can ask him," Konrad answered simply. He raised his voice and called out, "Livia! Please come here."

His daughter came out of the bedroom to join them. Segar saw her eyes go to the four playing cards in the center of the table. "What is it, Father?"

"Go to Cuza's camper and ask if he is well enough to join us now. If he is not, ask if we might visit him."

She nodded. "I'll go at once."

Segar watched through the window as she cut across the campground, weaving through the crowds of townspeople. "You will have your answer very shortly," Konrad told Radu.

Michael had reached out to pick up the four worn playing cards and was turning them over in his hands. He studied the identical Albanian flags on the back and asked, "Did your father come from Albania, Konrad?"

"He acquired the cards once when passing through there, in the late nineteen thirties."

"And he kept the rest of the deck?"

"No. He threw it into the campfire."

"That's right," Reynard confirmed. "I remember that part."

"The black eagle is similar to the one on the old Austrian flag, except that it has two heads."

"Albania is called the Land of the Eagle," Konrad explained. "The

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two-headed black eagle on the red background is the flag Scanderbeg used in his revolt against the Turks five hundred years ago. It is very dear to the Albanian people."

"Have you been there recently?"

"Not since the Communists took over in nineteen forty-four. Romania is bad enough, but at least there is some freedom here."

Segar started to say something in defense of the present government, but his words were cut short by the sudden return of Livia. She was out of breath from running and her face was ashen.

"What is it?" her father asked, rising to his feet.

"Cuza is dead! He's been murdered!"

Cuza had come to the festival grounds in a small camping vehicle. A canvas covering at the back gave it the look of a tent, and Captain Segar thought it more in keeping with the Gypsy spirit than the more modern trailers and camping vehicles. Livia led the way under the canvas flap and then held open the door of the vehicle so Segar and Michael could enter first.

The inside was more spacious and modern than one would have guessed from the exterior, with bunk beds, a bottled-gas stove, and a working refrigerator. There was even running water, apparently from a tank carried at the front of the vehicle. Cuza was in the lower of the bunk beds. Blankets covered his body to the neck, but even so it was easy to see the blood from the deep throat wound.

"A knife," Segar guessed. "A single slash while he slept."

Konrad Zuloaga entered then, trying to keep Radu and Reynard from following him through the doorway. "Like my brother," he said, his voice full of sadness.

"It means the killer is here," Michael told them, "on the festival grounds."

"It means more than that," Radu Heron argued. "Zuloaga killed old Cuza himself when he saw him at lunch. That's how he got his clue to the treasure."

"It does appear that the camper has been searched," Segar pointed out, indicating a half-open drawer and some papers on the floor. He bent to pick up a road map of the area that had been carelessly refolded in the wrong way.

"As I told you," Radu persisted. "Zuloaga killed him, found the playing card, and took it."

Michael turned to stare at him. "For what purpose? To reveal it to us, as Cuza himself would have done?"

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"No, to substitute another card and keep the location of the treasure to himself."

Konrad could take no more. "I loved and respected your father, Radu, but I can tolerate these charges no longer. Outside, we will settle this with knives!"

"No!" Livia screamed, grabbing her father's arm. "You're doing this for me. Stop it, both of you!"

"Not for you," Konrad told her. "For my honor."

Radu glared at Livia and spat on the floor. "I will wait outside, with my knife."

"I want to see that knife," Segar said. "Give it here."

"By whose order?"

Segar showed his badge and identification. "I have jurisdiction here until the arrival of the local police." He took the knife that Radu grudgingly surrendered and looked carefully at the blade. He could see no traces of dried blood, but decided to keep possession of it for a while.

Michael was sniffing the air around the stove. He stooped to peer carefully at one of the burners. "Segar, I can see some charred remains here. Something was burned recently. You can still catch a whiff of it in the air."

Segar glanced at the burner. "Nothing but charred remains, whatever it was."

He turned back to the others, going through the investigative routine he knew so well. "What time did you last see Cuza alive, Mr. Zuloaga?"

"About one-fifteen. That is when he gave me the card."

"I'd guess he's been dead over an hour, so he was probably killed before the start of the two o'clock meeting. If the motive was that playing card, it was important for the killer to strike before the meeting."

"Of course," Reynard agreed. "But Konrad already had the card."

"The killer had no way of knowing that," Segar said.

Radu glared at him.

"You're saying it was Reynard or me?"

Before Segar could answer, Michael gave a cry of triumph. Still bent over the stove, he lifted a portion of the burner and produced a tiny bit of stiff paper, charred on one side. "What is it, Michael?" Konrad asked.

"The corner of a playing card. See the red back?"

"The missing card!"

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"Can you tell which card it is?" Segar asked.

"I can, but it only confirms what I already knew. The card is the six of spades."

"The six of spades," Konrad Zuloaga repeated. "And whose card is it?"

"Your dead brother's, I think."

Segar ran over them from memory. "The six of spades, the six and eight of diamonds, the eight of clubs and hearts. How can that tell anyone where the Gypsy treasure is hidden?"

"It tells us that," Michael insisted, "and it also tells us who killed Greystone and old Cuza."

While they waited for the Oradea police to arrive, Michael herded everyone back to Zuloaga's mobile home. In addition to Konrad and Reynard and Radu, Livia joined them, along with Charlotte, the woman traveling with Reynard. As they settled down around the table, Livia averted her eyes from Radu. She had not spoken to her former husband all day so far as Michael and Segar could tell.

"I'll try to keep this as brief as possible," Michael explained, "so we can wrap it all up before the local police become involved. There are really only two logical possibilities regarding that burnt six of spades. One, it was Cuza's card and Konrad burned it after killing him so he could substitute the eight of clubs he showed us earlier. But I think I can show that it's highly unlikely any of the cards were substitutions.

"We've heard that Konrad and Greystone's father burned the rest of the original deck after passing out those five cards years ago. Since a deck with an Albanian flag on the back would be difficult to obtain in Romania, especially during the war, I think we can safely assume that none of you had a duplicate card or deck at the time. Did one of the five obtain a duplicate deck years later, with the purpose of hiding the treasure's location from all but himself? No, again, because all four of those cards came from a deck printed prior to nineteen forty-four."

"How do you know that?" Livia asked.

"Look again at the Albanian flag. A two-headed black eagle against a red background. Is that same flag in use by Albania today?"

"Of course it is," Konrad insisted.

Michael Vlado smiled and shook his head. "A minor but important change was made in 1944 by the new Communist government. A gold-edged red star, a symbol of Communism, was added just above

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the eagle's twin heads. So we can safely say the playing cards are the genuine article, because we can prove that they predate nineteen forty-four. Now if these four are genuine, what about the fifth one? There would be no purpose served in burning a fake card. Yet if the fifth one is genuine, it could only have come from Greystone. It must be the missing fifth card, and we can reasonably assume it was brought to Cuza's trailer by Greystone's killer, who then killed Cuza."

"Wait a minute," Konrad interrupted. "Why would he keep my brother's card for a few days and then burn it?"

"He kept it as a possible match to Cuza's or others that he found. But after killing Cuza he must have realized that if the card was found on him it would link him with this latest murder. So he burned it before leaving the trailer."

Konrad shook his head. "I would think he would keep the cards if he was seeking the treasure. Why kill us just to destroy them?"

"Exactly," Michael agreed. "Just to destroy them. The most likely reason is that the killer already knew the location of the treasure. He killed to keep the rest of you from finding out the location and discovering that the treasure is no longer there."

"Not there?" Radu gasped. "Where is it?"

"Remember the cards. Forget the suits—they're not important. The cards were three eights and two sixes. And what is that combination of cards called?" The others around the table looked blank. "The American game of poker is played throughout the world—even among Gypsies, as we saw when we arrived here today. And English-language phrases are often used. This combination of three of a kind and two of a kind is called a *full house.*"

"A full house," Konrad repeated.

"The house of Rudolph Fuhl, that farmer from across the road. We heard that the Prando farm was formerly on both sides of the road, and when the treasure was hidden the Fuhl house was part of it. In the intervening years, Fuhl found the treasure, perhaps from a clue left by his father. Then you wrote to say the Gypsies would gather to uncover the hiding place and he knew he had to act. He killed Greystone and Cuza in the hope of stealing their cards and keeping the hiding place a secret forever. It would be a simple task for him to return here this afternoon with the crowds and sneak into Cuza's trailer."

Radu Heron was on his feet. "Let's get him!" he shouted and ran for the door. Segar made a grab for him but missed.

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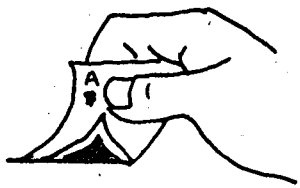
They hurried after him, with Michael and Segar in the lead. To Rudolph Fuhl, watching from his house, it must have seemed as if the entire Gypsy encampment might be storming the place. He appeared at the front door, rifle in hand, and killed Radu with a single shot. Before he could fire again, Captain Segar brought him down with two bullets from his pistol.

Fuhl confessed to the killings before he died, and in the basement of his house they found what little was left of the Gypsy treasure. "There's something, at least," Konrad Zuloaga said. "It'll feed a few families."

Michael nodded. Then he said, "I must be getting back to Gravita. The only treasure there is the beauty of the hills, but perhaps that is all we really need."



DETECTIVERSE

POINT OF ETIQUETTE

by R. C. SHEBELSKI

In criminal circles
To not seem an invader,
It's proper to say, "Goodbye—"
Not "I'll catch you later."

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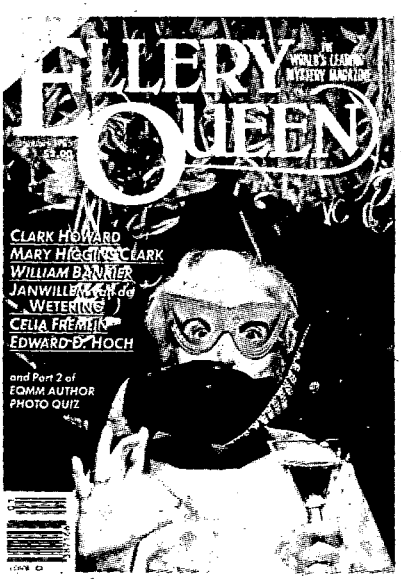

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a *NEW* short story by

JOHN C. BOLAND

John C. Boland, whose Wall Street's Insiders (How You Can Profit with the Smart Money) *was published a year ago by Morrow, tells you here about two drifters, one of them, Smithy, a man watching himself even as his emotions carry him away . . .*

MOUNTAIN FIRE

by JOHN C. BOLAND

I'd been riding the rails three months, heading West because there was supposed to be jobs and they didn't ask where you'd been or what you'd been doing. I was twenty-six, and Mom was right when she said that was a dangerous age. I was strong enough to think I could get what I wanted and not smart enough to see that the wanting was even stronger. For most of the three months I'd just gone round in a big circle without getting on to California. For a few weeks, I did some farm work on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Then I headed up to Pittsburgh on a rumor that a flat mill was reopening. But that was like most rumors.

I met up with Tom Crane on the Pittsburgh & West Virginia line, a little thing that ran sort of mountaintop to mountaintop down through the coal country. He was going home, and I wouldn't have hooked up with him but he said there would be a good bed and a square meal at the end of the line. He was a scrawny kid a couple years younger than me. He'd gone North to look for work, made a little money, and then got it taken from him in Binghamton.

He had stringy blond hair and a narrow face that gave away whatever he was thinking. Usually that was how he wanted to get home to his wife—I guessed so he could tell her his hard-luck story.

We left the train at Washuta, a rail town where three or four lines

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crossed. It was in the hills, and the streets caught drifts of smoke and soot as a coal seam burned deep underground. The air smelled like the mouth of a well that had gone bad.

I was half ready to grab the next thing heading West, but his home was a few miles down the road and he couldn't shut up about Sally and her cooking. There was just her and his dad, so I wouldn't be in the way. Besides, we were buddies. I knew that his dad and wife would look at me like a skunk at a wedding, but I was hungry and didn't like Tom Crane enough to care.

Their crummy house sat on a paved street, which made it the best street in Washuta Falls, which was what the village was called. We'd hitched a ride down the highway, and when we trudged uphill past a gas station and post office Tom was singing like a Bible salesman about how good life was at home. He didn't have a verse on how they'd feel about him coming back with empty pockets.

We got to the house, and like I say it was crummy. Loose shingles, no paint since the war, a front porch sagging like a whore's back, and a chimney with a couple of bricks fallen out. But I hadn't been expecting geraniums in windowboxes.

Even a couple of windows were punched out. It was March, and I could tell from the road that nobody was living there. But Tom had to run up and look through the windows, stomp around the porch calling for his wife, raising a fuss. It sort of worked, because one of the neighbors came over and started gabbing about what had happened.

The neighbor gave us a ride back to Washuta proper. He told his story a couple of times, improving the details. I figured Hollywood should have heard it.

I jumped down from the jalopy and made for the rail yard. Tom ran after me. "Hey, hey—you can't go!"

"Bet I can."

"A friend would stay and help." He was such a jerk that I felt like socking him. "Pop had some money—maybe fifty bucks," he pleaded. "You're welcome to half of it if you help me get things fixed. It's gotta be a mistake."

So we went down to the town hall, the back door of it, and into the jail to see his wife. She'd been convicted the week before for sticking the old man. Got him in the belly half a dozen times according to Tom's neighbor, and hadn't said she was sorry. She was

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too good-looking to hang, but the judge had said forty years. If I ever got that kind of deal, they could just as well hang me.

Jail clothes don't display much, but Sally Crane was prime. A lot of Irish or Gypsy or hill magic showed up in walnuty hair and rose cheeks and green eyes. She was about twenty, as beautiful as anything I'd ever seen in Philly or New York, and like a fire burning bright in this dunghill. She looked at me first and then at Tom, and when she and Tom burbled over each other I couldn't guess what she saw in him.

She told her story, which hadn't been good enough for the town to forget that Noah Crane was a church deacon and a lonely man since Tom's mother died. It stood to reason he must've been led on if he did what Tom's bride said.

It all took the kid like an axe in the head. Old Noah'd been visiting her room since the week after Tom went North. And he'd beat her up after every time because she'd led him into evil. That was working out to about three beatings a week, and two months ago she'd brought a pair of garden shears in from the shed and hid them under her pillow.

I listened and voted sort of with the judge. Half the story was probably right, or maybe sixty percent. You could never be sure which were the right parts because she told it all like the gospel. But I'd have bet that she was getting something out of it during those months, because she wasn't the kind not to. If old Noah had a little money, maybe she was counting on getting her hands on it because he'd have to send her away before Tom came back. The busybody neighbor had said that the cops arrested her fifty miles down the road, and she didn't mention that.

One half of my mind made those calculations and figured the judge had done right. The other half knew that if I'd been on the bench she would've walked free.

Tom was so shaken up all he could do was snuffle. After a while, Sally noticed that I wasn't snuffling, that I was sitting on the wood stool alert and quiet, and her attention shifted. She held Tom's hands across the table and looked over his shoulder. "Well, Tommy, you listened to enough about how I messed up. Tell me about yourself. And about Mr. Smith."

That was my name just then. Mr. Smith. Joe or Dave Smith, probably.

And she said, "You can come over and sit with us, Mr. Smith. You're Tommy's good friend, and that's almost like you're family."

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"Smithy'll stand by a buddy," Tom said without a trace of not meaning it.

"That's what I need," she said, "friends who'll stand by me."

Tom wasn't swallowing well. It didn't seem to be hard on him, holding hands with a gal who'd stuck garden shears in his daddy's belly. But I suppose he was thinking about it.

She handled it just right. "Tommy, don't let anyone in Washuta tell you your papa wasn't a good man. He was a godly man. I just can't count Daddy Crane's kindnesses to me. But something possessed him. What he done wasn't his doing."

A new batch of tears started down Tom's cheeks. "I lose my dad, and they're taking you away. It don't seem fair."

"It ain't," she said. Her voice was real solemn. "Ain't fair to any of us, sweetheart. Especially to you. But sometimes life ain't fair."

Tom slumped to the table, sobbing onto her hands. Her glance drifted to me. Her eyes told me all the things we could do together and I believed every one.

She didn't want to spend forty years locked up.

"Where'd your wife come from?" We sat at the Washuta Diner. Sally's lawyer had staked Tom to a dollar.

"Down toward Kinneysville. It's a mining town."

"Tell me about her."

He wanted to think about how much he missed her, not talk. His tongue was thick. "Sally Talbot, she was. They're a big family, lots of cousins. She was going with Roy Coker, that was Buddy Talbot's nephew, when she came up here to get some schooling. I had to lick Roy fair and square before she'd go out with me."

He sounded proud, and I thought Roy Coker must have been quite a man.

"She didn't have money enough to stay here. Tried working for the rag works for a few weeks, but there was some trouble. When I asked her to marry me, she accepted right away. Made me so happy!"

I tried to imagine flocks of Talbots and Cokers with Sally's inner heat. They would set the Kinneysville hills smoking.

"She's a pretty woman," I said.

He got dreamy-eyed. Climbing into bed with her must have been a one-night book of revelations. I squished coffee between my teeth and told myself I was nuts, agreed one hundred percent that I was

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nuts, nothing was worth really big trouble, and knew I had to find out if this woman was the exception.

The town closed down at sunset, except for the rail building, and we had to walk the two miles to Washuta Falls. We kicked in the back door, found some kerosene for the lamps, and uncovered a little jug of white lightning. I got wood going in the stove and made coffee while Tom moped around the place getting reacquainted. You'd have thought he'd been gone five years instead of five months. If I'd let him, he'd have dug out his book of Bible verses.

"I figure your wife won't last long once they move her up to State Prison," I said.

He didn't catch on, so I told him about all the dyke guards and how they'd cut her hair short and work her twelve hours a day in the laundry. Then how they sometimes hired out the good-looking ones for parties at the men's prison. He never asked how I knew so much about the penal system in a state I'd never seen before. I said, "I can't see a man letting that happen to his wife when she was just defending herself."

Noah Crane was probably banging away on his coffin lid, but Tom couldn't hear. Maybe he'd stopped thinking about the tragedy of it all, or the injustice, and started remembering the nights under the eiderdown comforter. That would do it for me.

I fed him a slug of whiskey. "You know, if you wanted to make a move of some kind, I'd be right behind you. I can't stomach what they're doing to an innocent woman."

He wasn't a complete jackass, just two-thirds. He didn't talk about the lawyer, or the judge, he just stumbled into the living room and brought back a pistol that looked like Grant had carried it at Gettysburg. It was a cannon, forty-four caliber, with a hammer that could break your thumb. He'd brought a box of shells and he loaded the thing and pointed it at the wall.

"Put it down," I said. I didn't want him blowing the house apart. "We'd need a car."

"There's Poley's next door."

"And we'd need to think about when to do it—and where we'd go."

"Where we'd go's simple. They'd hide us in Kinneysville. Lots of closed-up mines back in the hills. We could stay there till things blowed over."

This wouldn't blow over, and I didn't like the thought of hiding

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in a hole while a state posse beat the brush. "That part sounds okay," I said.

"Maybe we could clear her name."

He was dreaming, but I nodded to that one, too. We talked about timing and I said, "You better let me carry the Gatling gun."

He shook his head and shoved it under his belt.

"What about your daddy's money?"

We tore the bedroom apart looking for the coffee can, but I guessed Sally had needed something to get her fifty miles down the road.

Things never work out the way you hope, especially when you're hoping hard, with the wild buzz in your belly and those pictures of what you want jumping behind your eyes. I'd learned that a long time before. You know it won't work out quite right, so you try to get most of it.

Tom went over to his neighbor's house and came back in ten minutes driving the beat-up Ford. He looked like a kid who'd cheated on a Sunday-school test. "I had to tell Poley I'd give him five dollars when Daddy's will clears."

"Have we got enough gas?" Between us we had fifty cents.

"Plenty for Kinneysville and beyond. Hop in."

I climbed aboard. The thing was a junker. One headlight was dead. Tom pushed it backfiring down the hill and stalled it on the first slope up. We got her going again and I tried to remember everything I'd seen when the train was lumbering up that last mountain. There'd been a road heading west, past a sawmill, and the tracks had followed it for a while. There was a quarry, tarpaper shacks, a coal yard, a cement plant, and then the dirty edges of town with the smoke lolling in. Eyes closed, I could picture it all.

We rolled into Washuta. The only place that wasn't asleep was the train yard, where a switch engine was pushing coal cars along a siding. I wished I'd hopped a freight that afternoon.

We'd gone over it at the house. "You remember that guard Cecil?" Tom asked. "He's the one with the big belly."

The one who couldn't take his eyes off Sally Talbot Crane. I remembered a man with no chin, a hairline that had crawled to the back of his head so he had a face like a wrinkled yellow balloon stretching from his collar all the way back to the greasy hair.

"It's been a while since I was around," Tom said, "but here's the way it used to be. Cecil's the night man. He tends the jail in case

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Preston Robbins—he's the deputy chief—in case Press has to bring in a drunk. So if Press isn't there, all we gotta do is tie up Cecil."

"Easy enough. You give me the gun, I'll cover him."

Tom shook his head. "I'll cover him."

I said okay but figured I was going to get that gun before long.

Press Robbins' car wasn't in front of the town hall when we drifted by, so he was out patrolling or having a drink with the switching-yard chief. Tom jerked the Ford around behind the building. He wanted to leave the engine running. He'd seen a few movies and thought that would be smart. I told him to cut it.

We walked right in the jail door. Cecil was listening to hillbilly music out of Wheeling on the radio. Tom nodded to him, real polite. "We come to get Sally. We're going away."

Cecil wasn't half as stupid as Tom Crane. He didn't take any time to catch on that this was a jailbreak and it wouldn't stay polite. But he wasn't wearing a gun and Tom had opened his jacket to show off the horseleg, so he kept his hands flat on the desk and cussed us. "You ain't got no brains, Tommy. That girl's a born whore."

I didn't move, figuring Tom would blow his head off. But he didn't even draw the gun. "I just want her out, Ceic."

He got the key and started toward the back, and I said, "Whoa, buddy! Who's going to watch Ceic? You go get your girl." And I'd finally hit it right, because he wouldn't want me bursting through the cell door to the rescue. He'd want that for himself. So he gave me the cannon, and I cocked it and waited till he was through the door before I aimed it at Ceic, who started to see what was coming.

I shot him in the middle of the chest. The boom in that tiny room was worse than a cannon. The shot knocked him out of the chair like a buffalo's kick. His heels came up over his head and he somersaulted backward.

I'd known from the start that I'd have to do that, but it didn't make it any better. Except in anger, I'd never killed a man before. The anger wasn't as hot as this thing about the woman.

I looked away from Cecil because I wanted to see her eyes as she came through the door, wanted to see what she felt when she knew what I'd done for her.

What I saw made it worth ten Cecils. I didn't know what she'd had to do to get out of Kinneysville, or what she'd done with Noah to get out of Washuta, or what she'd done to make Ceic so sure about her, but I knew she was making me a pledge from the bottom of her

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heart. She was going with me all the way wherever I wanted to go, and it would be a long way. Maybe all the way to Mexico.

Tom Crane looked at Cecil and swayed. "Jeez, Smithy—"

"He tried something. We've gotta move it, buddy."

I kept the gun cocked because the way my luck runs sometimes I was half expecting to walk right into Deputy Chief Press Robbins. Instead, the lot beside the building was empty, and I guessed no one had heard the bomb going off. "You drive," I told Tom. We piled into the Ford. Sally got in front with him, but I knew that didn't matter. I sat in the back with my elbows on the seatback between them and sucked in her smell. "What's the road that goes past the cement plant?" I said.

"Highway 9."

"Take that."

He argued because that wasn't the way to Kinneysville, but I explained that they'd be expecting us to head there and we should take a roundabout route.

The old Ford chugged my way, alone on the road, and I looked for the landmarks in the dark. There was a glow here and there where smoke brought the heat up from underground, sulphurous and red, but it didn't show anything. I had a good memory, though. When I thought I had it about right, after a couple miles, I said, "Pull over a minute, Tom. I want to make sure we're not being followed."

It was the only time I remembered calling him by name. He didn't see any lights behind us, but we eased off the road. It was cold in the mountains. Tom and I climbed out. Sally huddled in on herself. I thought I knew where it was, because the road dipped sharply just ahead. The rail line had done that.

"Let's go down that way. We gotta make a plan."

He was giddy with pleasure at having her back and laughed. "What plan do we need? We just hide out in Kinneysville till it blows over."

"They're gonna figure it was you who got her out," I said. "So it won't blow over soon, if ever."

"I wish you hadn't shot Ceic. Do you think he's dead?"

"He's dead. He knew I was in on it, so I decided my odds went up that way."

"Oh." His voice was shaken. He was a step or two ahead of me, and I wanted it so he wouldn't know it was coming. But I couldn't

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see him in the dark, so I couldn't have it that way. I had to wait till the muzzle of the gun touched the back of his head.

So I went ahead and killed him.

I brought the car down close. I'd been right about the quarry. It was fifty yards off the road, just across the railroad tracks. The headlight didn't reach that far, but the quarry walls were pale granite and caught the tiny bit of starlight. I pulled him all that way, blowing hard in the cold air, and rolled him off the edge and heard the splash.

Then I went back to Sally. Because you can't be sure how long it will work your way. She wasted a few tears but didn't mean it. She gasped and giggled and said she'd never known anybody like me. Sure as hell I'd never known anyone like her.

"We're a lot alike," she said. "We both gotta have what we want."

"I want a lot of things," I said.

"Things you're not gifted to have?"

"Those especially."

We decided we'd go to Texas first. No one would care about Mr. Jones and his wife. We would go to Texas and then to Sacramento. Neither of us had been there, but the name sounded pretty.

We got to Wheeling and held up there for several days. I found some stray money and we lived it up in a pretty nice hotel. Sally got a dress that was almost good enough for her and a hat with carnations on it. We went out maybe twice for supper and a movie. I wondered if Sacramento could be any better than Wheeling.

We changed cars a second time one evening at a little place in Tennessee, and that didn't go as smoothly as I'd wanted. From then I knew we had to move fast.

Ten miles west of that little place, they were waiting just this side of an iron bridge and didn't even tell us to stop. Sally was driving and all I saw was part of her hat go flying, with the red carnations, and then the windshield disappeared and my chest got stung.

We went off the road and down a slope, and when the river water crashed through the windshield hole I thought of Tom Crane, who'd had it good for a while and hadn't known except for a split second how it would end. I'd had it good but I'd always known.

I tried to clutch Sally but it was dark and my arms were empty.

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Willie struggled to his feet, drawing layers of rancid clothing about him. "I don't need cops. Look at you, they even took you away in the cruiser."

"And let me right out again."

Willie reached for Sam Mason's wolf's-head walking stick. "Take that thing out of my face!"

"Hands off my stick, you abusive little troublemaker!"

Alfonse Paradis, at the wheel of the police cruiser, slowed down and let the siren produce a throaty growl. The men turned his way. "Try to get along, you two," he called through the open window, "okay?" . . .

ONE CONSIDERATION WITH ANOTHER

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Seeing old Willie Grover slouching at the pedestrian crosswalk, and feeling stressed from all the aggravation Margaret had given him about the corduroy jacket he was wearing, Sam Mason considered walking on by. Willie was Baytown's leading drunk. Forty years ago he had been in Mason's high-school English class and had been impossible to deal with even then. Now Mason was three years into his retirement, yet Willie looked more like the teacher's father than a former pupil.

"Watch out, Snuffy," Grover said, using the nickname applied by generations of students. Aged sixteen, Mason had lied his way into the Hastings Light Infantry and had managed to arrive in Europe

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just in time for the chlorine gas. He was lucky—he only got a whiff—but it was enough to make his nose run for all the winters to come. Snuffy Mason.

"What's the problem?" he asked sharply, pausing by the traffic lights and leaning on his wolf's-head walking stick. There had been a second argument with Margaret this morning concerning the *Pirates of Penzance*. Having lost that one, too, he was eager to take Willie on.

"Don't go by that," Willie said. He pointed at the pedestrian signals, which were registering WALK. In a few seconds, far less time than it took to cross the road, they would change to DON'T WALK and the idling, menacing cars would gun through. "They've been like that for ten minutes. They're busted."

Mason hated the new signals. They existed at chosen sites and were part of a plan by Commissioner Hanbidge to do away with the present system of striped crosswalks where pedestrians now had the right of way. Hanbidge wanted to speed up traffic. And, Mason had said more than once, he wanted to speed slow-footed pensioners to their graves.

He said, "Are you sure they're broken?"

"Sure I'm sure," Willie said, spraying a mixture of wine and saliva past lips twisted with the grievances of a lifetime. "Look at those cars. Bastards are sneaking through."

It was true. Frustrated drivers were edging forward, encroaching on the striped pathway, darting ahead and away. "Right," Mason said firmly, assuming the authority that had been so effective in calling classroom anarchists to order. "Here is a chance to save somebody's life." Gripping his walking stick by the wooden end, he raised the brass wolf's-head and used it to smash the glass face of the WALK light: "Better a broken light than a faulty one that could lure a person into a fatal accident."

"You're gonna get it now, Snuffy." Willie sounded thrilled. He turned away and began limping down the hill toward his lair in Victoria Park.

Mason was on his way across the road, intending to smash the light on the other side, when he saw what Willie had noticed a few seconds earlier. The police car rolled to a stop, a uniformed officer climbed out, and, putting on his cap, he approached at a controlled pace.

"Quit breaking those lights," he said.

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"The lights are out of order. They were stuck on 'Walk.' Cars were encroaching. It was a dangerous situation."

"You can't touch those lights. Better give me that stick." The policeman, whose face Mason had never seen before, spoke with a French-Canadian accent.

"You obviously don't know who I am. My name is Mason, I've taught at Baytown High for generations." As the cop blinked at him, not impressed, the elderly educator felt a twinge of panic. "Willie!" he called to Grover, who was only yards away, listening. "You saw the lights were faulty! You're the one who mentioned it!"

"Nothing to do with me," the drunk said, shuffling faster down the hill. "I never saw nothing."

"I did," the policeman said, taking away Mason's walking stick. "You'd better get in the car, sir. We'll sort this out down at the station."

Chief Greb apologized to Mason and gave him back his stick. He wished the retired academic would wear something other than wrinkled corduroy with bent lapels and tattered leather patches on the elbows so that his newest cop would not mistake a respectable citizen for Willie Grover's friend. "Mind you," the chief went on, putting a hand on his constable's shoulder, "Paradis did the right thing. He's new to Baytown and we can use all the job-enthusiasm we can get."

"I have nothing but praise for Officer Paradis," Mason said. He was anxious to get out of the police station, to buy his paper and go home. If Margaret had cooled off, he would tackle her again about the Gilbert and Sullivan production at the school. "I can see why Jenny Birch married him and brought him home with her from Montreal. Their loss, our gain."

Greb squired Mason to the front door and outside onto the edge of the market square, where he spoke to him confidentially. "Not really your style of behavior, sir. Last person in the world. Are you under some sort of pressure? Seen your doctor lately?"

"How superficially you know me, Chief. Yes, I'm under pressure. Who isn't?" He couldn't tell Greb that he wanted to go on stage with the student operatic society as one of the bobbies singing "A Policeman's Lot Is Not a Happy One" and that his wife was fighting him tooth and nail, saying he'd only make a fool of himself—and of her. "I've always hated the way cars are pushing pedestrians off the streets," he declaimed. "Pollution, noise, danger. And now these rude signs—walk, don't walk. How dare they speak to me like that?"

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Mason shrugged free of Greb's overly familiar arm laid across his shoulder. "I intend to carry a light with a portable battery, and when I cross the street it will come on and tell drivers, 'Back off!' "

Mason crossed the square and entered the lobby of the Coronet Hotel, where he bought his newspaper in the old establishment's atmosphere of furniture polish, beer, cigars, and roast beef. Outside again, he turned right without any conscious thought and wandered down Front Street and into Victoria Park, moving toward the stone parapet where the river broadened into the calm, reedy surface of the bay.

His reason for coming resolved itself from a blurred brown bundle on the grass beside the wall into the supine form, as he came closer, of Willie Grover. Mason used his stick to prod a boot.

"Thanks for your support," he said.

"Stop that."

"You were the one who told me the lights were faulty. Why did you walk away?"

"Crazy old man, smashing things."

"I should smash you."

"I have a hard enough time." Willie struggled to his feet, drawing layers of rancid clothing about him. "I don't need cops. Look at you, they even took you away in the cruiser."

"And let me right out again."

"Me, I'd still be inside. You don't know what it's like. Take that thing out of my face!"

"Hands off my stick, you abusive little troublemaker!"

Alfonse Paradis, at the wheel of the police cruiser, slowed down and let the siren produce a throaty growl. The men turned his way. "Try to get along, you two," he called through the open window, "okay?"

"I'm leaving," Mason said, and he walked away, shaking fist and stick at the town drunk one more time.

At the far end of the park, heading for the hill and home, and shifting his grip on the walking stick, he felt a sharp stab on the palm of his hand. He examined the wolf's-head and found it loose, the wood splintered where it met the metal. The attack on the light had caused this damage. Not wanting to lose the ornamental part (the stick had been a retirement gift from the faculty at Baytown High), Mason twisted it off and slipped it into his jacket pocket. The stick itself he threw into the bushes. He would buy a new one and have the wolf's-head properly fitted . . .

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When Sam Mason arrived home, he found Margaret sitting on the porch drinking tea and reading. "Where did you get the newspaper?" he said. "I just bought a newspaper."

"Borrowed it next door. By the time you got home it could be yesterday's newspaper."

"I was held up." Mason noted a bandage on his wife's finger. They played the roles of frequent antagonists but he never came into her presence without inspecting her, taking inventory, as if she were his collection of crown jewels. "What did you do to your finger?"

"Hammered it. Driving tacks into upholstery. I've begun putting the new material on the kitchen chairs."

"Bothering you?"

"Not as much as what you've been up to. Why does Jenny Birch want to bring her husband here for coffee and apologies?"

"Come again?"

"She telephoned half an hour ago, all embarrassed. Alfonse, she says, had no idea it was you."

Margaret Mason regarded her husband with eyes that knew all his secrets. "He's a policeman, isn't he? I pretended I understood what was going on. They'll be here at eight."

"I was not arrested, I was detained. And warned." Mason told the story of the faulty pedestrian lights, his attack upon them, and the arrival of Officer Paradis. "That wretch, Willie Grover, he set me up and then walked away."

"He's so hostile, he frightens me. I cross the road."

"I've made up my mind about *Penzance*. Not only will I choreograph the lads, show them the funny moves with the nightsticks, I'm also going to play the part of lead policeman. As invited."

"They only asked you to laugh at you. Sam Mason up there making a fool of himself."

"That's what you say. I don't think it's how they see it."

"Promise me you'll get out of that dead jacket before Jenny and her husband show up."

Alfonse Paradis fitted in well at the kitchen table. He said yes to everything—yes to more coffee, yes to another slab of ginger cake, and when Sam Mason, relaxing as conversation flowed from this nice young couple, offered a sip of cognac the out-of-uniform cop said yes to that, too. He was a farm boy from the Laurentiens, it turned out, and the best hours of his formative years had been spent in conversation around tables in kitchens with warm stoves in them.

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"I knew it would be okay," Jenny said, "once Al had a chance to meet you and apologize." She was a big blonde woman who in her thirties looked not much different from the teenager she had been in Mason's classroom. In those days she was one of the girls who made the old soldier's mind wander on a late-spring afternoon with all the windows open and the smell of lilacs drifting in. Now she was somebody important at Komplex Computers, had impressed them so much they sent her to the Montreal head office for a year's special training. When she came home, her policeman came with her because her job was better than his, and, besides, somebody had to catch the Baytown villains.

"This is interesting," Paradis said. Having stirred his coffee, he was looking at the colorful coat-of-arms on the end of the silver spoon.

"That's the Hastings Light Infantry insignia," Mason said. "I acquired a set of these spoons years ago, when I was still active."

"See how they're wearing out," Margaret said. "Left to me, I'd put them away but he insists on using them."

"I'm wearing out myself," the teacher said.

"Not you." Her frown was a mixture of disapproval and affection.

The telephone rang. Mason lifted the receiver from its cradle on the wall and identified himself. The caller projected a resonant voice, allowing everyone around the table to hear it. "Clement Foy calling from radio station CBAY. We're intrigued by your run-in with the pedestrian lights. Can I persuade you to come down to the studio and record an interview on the subject?"

"I'd be happy to forget it."

"Commissioner Hanbidge thinks it's important. He is already on record as deploring the episode. When told of your action, he said, 'That old codger wants to drag us all back to the nineteen-thirties.'"

Mason reached for his cognac and knocked it back. "In that case, Mr. Foy, tell me when you'd like me to come in."

When he put down the telephone, having promised to arrive at the studio tomorrow afternoon at four, Margaret said, "What was wrong with the nineteen-thirties anyway? You could hear the words of the songs."

Sam Mason left the house early next morning. He had given himself a schedule of things to do because the pending interview had put him on edge and he didn't want to hang about, getting on Margaret's nerves. He left her with hammer, tacks, scissors, and up-

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holstery fabric, all spread out on the kitchen table. "Chairs like new by the time you get home," she promised.

Mason went first to the public library, where he browsed and found a leatherbound volume of the poems of Austin Dobson. For over an hour he turned crisp pages, studying drawings by Hugh Thomson of Eighteenth Century women in embroidered gowns and being carried away by simple verses to a life he envied.

"The ladies of St. James's
Go swinging to the play;
Their footmen run before them
With a 'Stand by! Clear the way!'
But Phyllida, my Phyllida!
She takes her buckled shoon
When we go out a-courting
Beneath the harvest moon."

Then Mason went walkabout along the main street, having as many words as he could with shopkeepers and clerks and clientele. The schoolteacher had never been willing to enter a penetrating relationship with anybody other than his Margaret. He was aware of the disability (if that's what it was) and he counterbalanced it by scattering cheerful greetings about him like seed. Most took hold and grew, surrounding Mason wherever he went with smiling faces.

His movement, as one o'clock in the afternoon approached, was ever in the direction of the Coronet Hotel. This being Thursday, his arrival was anticipated. Millie had reserved the small table by the window, and as Mason tucked himself in she told him what was good in the kitchen. He chose the veal. With his bottle of chablis opened and poured, the old man stretched his legs under the table, stared out across the market square to the police station, scene of yesterday's humiliation, then allowed his mind to consider the ritualized movements of the Penzance policemen he would demonstrate at this afternoon's rehearsal.

The meal was almost finished and Mason was eating his crème caramel when the hallucination occurred.

It lasted no more than a second but it was as clear as a photograph. Margaret stood on the pavement outside the dining-room window, looking in at her husband with an agonized expression in her eyes. Her hands were raised dramatically before her, causing Mason to recall Shakespeare's line, "Out, damned spot!" Then the image vanished, but this appearance of Margaret like a ghost at the feast troubled the old man for hours . . .

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The boys were in good form at the high school. They were delighted to be sprung from classes—chemistry or algebra or Latin—to gather in the auditorium while old Snuffy climbed onto the stage and revealed this showbiz side of his character. "Hold your batons as trumpets, so." He showed them. "And bring down your right foot in a unison stomp, like this." He sang as he marched on in a Groucho crouch: "With catlike tread, *slam!* Upon our prey we steal, *slam!*"

The lads came on and did it, looking and sounding good. And so the rehearsal went, turning an hour into a seeming fifteen minutes. "Taking one consideration with another," Mason sang, knees vibrating, "a policeman's lot is not a nappy one. Make sure you sing 'nappy.'"

So delightful was his session on stage that Sam Mason had left the school and walked all the way down the hill to the studios of CBAY before he remembered that his interview was to be on the contentious subject of Councillor Hanbidge's pedestrian lights. But it turned out all right. Clement Foy played the Hanbidge tape in hopes of inflaming the old man into losing his cool and saying something he would later regret and the listeners would love. But the teacher was in too good a mood.

"Hanbidge is on the side of progress," Mason concluded, drawing satisfaction from the disappointment on the interviewer's face. "For this, in a general way, he is to be praised. It is a matter of balance. Better conditions for motorists, by all means—but long life to the people, the very old and the very young, who must cross the road in front of them."

Foy offered grudgingly to have him driven home but Mason said no thanks, he would walk. He was closing the front door of the radio station behind him when the two-tone cruiser of the Baytown Police pulled in and the passenger door was opened by Chief Greb, stretching back across the front seat. Alfonse Paradis was at the wheel. "Would you get in, please?" Greb said.

"I'd rather walk home, really."

"We're taking you in for questioning."

"Good Lord." Mason was so astonished he slipped into the car and slammed the door. "What about?"

"I believe you know."

"I don't."

"Where have you been today?"

"At the library. Walking the streets. Lunching at the Coronet. Taking rehearsal in the high-school auditorium."

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"Did you wander down beside the bay?"

Mason wondered if he was forgetting something. "No. When was I last there? Yesterday, when—"

"When you had your fight with Willie Grover."

"Not a fight. We argued."

Paradis turned onto Pinnacle Street, heading for the police station. He said, "When I drove past, you were shaking that stick of yours very close to the man's head. And you looked angry."

"He's an infuriating person."

"Where is your walking stick?" Greb asked. "You aren't carrying it today."

"It's broken. When I hit the traffic lights, the brass head came loose. I took it off and put it in my pocket. The stick—I threw it away."

"So the brass head would be where?"

"In the jacket pocket, at home."

Greb glanced at Paradis. "Take us up to the Mason place. Elm Avenue, isn't it, sir?"

As the car veered up Bridge hill, Mason said, "Can I be told what's going on?"

"We're trying to find out who killed Willie Grover," Greb told him. "His body was found this afternoon floating in the bay. With marks on the head made by a blunt instrument."

Maggie Mason looked distraught when the police officers brought her husband to the door. She had been fretting, she said, ever since they telephoned to ask where he could be found. They stood talking in the kitchen, surrounded by the clutter of removable chair seats, upholstery fabric, tacks, and scissors. "I haven't been able to get on with my work," she said. The hammer lay in the sink and she removed it as she filled the kettle to make tea. Greb asked about the wolf's-head. Sick to death of the tattered jacket, it seemed Mrs. Mason had jammed it on top of a box of rubbish and set it out that morning for the garbage collectors. It was gone.

Not necessarily forever, Greb predicted. If they got lucky, they might turn it up before that load went into the incinerator. Deciding not to wait for the tea, he assigned Constable Paradis to look into it. "Thanks for the hospitality," he said as they went to the front door. "Seeing as it's you, Mr. Mason, I won't take you in. But you'll have to admit, there's a circumstantial case against you. I trust you, sir, to stay close to home."

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"Surely you believe me about the walking stick," Mason said. "Why is it so important to you to find the brass head?"

Greb looked embarrassed and stubborn at the same time. "Bloodstains," he said. "I have to be suspicious, it's my job. And forensic can find bloodstains anywhere."

In the car, driving away, Paradis said, "Does Baytown have forensic?"

"We get a guy down from Toronto," Greb said.

In the kitchen, Mason watched Maggie take the hammer and hold it under the tap. After a while, as hot water steamed and splashed over it, he asked her what she was doing.

"You heard what he said about blood."

Years of living together had reinforced the telepathic communication between Sam and Margaret. Mason reached past her and turned off the tap. He took the hammer from her and set it aside. He found a towel and dried her hands, looking into her eyes all the time he did so. She stared back at him through a curtain of shock. "Sit down and tell me about it," he said quietly.

At the table, he drew his chair close so their knees were touching. He gathered her hands in his and held them on his lap. "It happened in here," she explained, "there by the sink. I came in and found him going through the refrigerator. *My* refrigerator. He was helping himself to beer."

"You'd better start at the beginning."

"He showed up about an hour after you left this morning. Willie Grover—drunk as usual. That awful red, wet face of his and he lets his plate slide half out of his mouth, does it on purpose to be disgusting. He came in through the back garden—I'm sure nobody saw him."

"What did he want?"

"You to give him money. Or he was going to the police. He showed me a mark on his cheek. It was a fair bruise—I could see dried blood. He said he fell after you argued with him yesterday. It was your fault, he said."

"He may have fallen, but not when I was with him."

"Anyway, he threatened to bring in the police. He said that new officer saw you looking as if you were going to hit him."

"Yes."

"Then he became abusive. Not physically, only verbally, but the things he said to me were upsetting. And I began to get angry, I couldn't help it."

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"You should have called the police, had him arrested."

"I said I would, but he welcomed it. He said, 'If you don't get them here, I will.' He said he was going to wait for you to come home. I knew that meant hours. And I was confused. So I tried to bluff him out. I went to the front door and flung it open and ordered him to get out that minute. I wanted him gone by the front so there'd be nothing surreptitious about it." Margaret closed her eyes. "I leaned against the wall, waiting for him to respond, praying he'd go. There was silence. I hoped he was making up his mind—then I heard him opening and closing drawers in here. I said, 'What the hell are you up to?' Then I heard the refrigerator door being opened and that was when I cracked. I ran in here and saw him crouching down, pawing through the food, reaching for a tin of beer. I went mad, Sam. I wanted him dead, truly. I took up the hammer and brought it down on his head. He went to his knees and the door swung shut. It was as if there was a slug or maggots or something else horrible on my kitchen floor and I wanted to squash it. I hit him again and again . . ."

Mason put his forehead against hers. He held her face in his hands until the outrage and the agony flowed from her mind to his and became balanced equally between them. "It's all right, love. You did what anybody would have done. Willie was asking for it. Literally. He hasn't wanted to live, he's been trying to die for years. At last he got somebody to take him out."

"I wrapped his head in a towel. I managed to get him out the back door and into the car, on the floor in the back. He weighed very little, like a boy."

"He didn't eat."

"I drove down to the bayshore, to a quiet place, and I put him in the water. Then I came back here and cleaned things up. And waited for you to come home."

"All right." Mason kissed her. "I've told you what I think of Willie and his getting killed. Whatever happens now, we'll have to live with the fact that you killed him. We'll get used to that idea and we'll live with it."

"But the police."

"This is Baytown, dearie. The police have enough on their plate just coping with new traffic lights."

Alfonse Paradis stood in the morgue at Baytown General Hospital and waited for Greb to lift the sheet and show him the body of Willie

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Grover. Greb did and said, "The blows were to the back of the head. That's where the damage is."

The dead man looked younger now than the image the former Montreal cop retained of him, drifting the streets, bothering people. "Hasn't anybody stripped the body?" Paradis asked.

"The undertaker will do that."

"I mean what about clues?"

"What clues? Somebody bashed his head in and dropped him in the bay."

Paradis kept his face expressionless as he stared at his chief. "Murders can be funny. What if he snatched a purse and was later killed by the husband of the woman, and he's got her credit card in his pocket?"

Greb laughed. "You're talking about another guy. Another town."

"Can we take a look at him? I'm curious."

"Okay." Greb took the cover away. The garments had dried, but Willie always looked as if he'd just climbed out of a river. The officers went through his pockets and found nothing.

Paradis was frisking the corpse, feeling the limbs as if there might be a concealed weapon and a body-search could prevent an attack. Raising a leg, examining the broken shoe, he noticed a glint of reflected light. There was something shiny wedged between the leather and the bony foot. He used a finger to hook it out and showed it to the chief.

"A spoon." Greb was astonished.

"I saw spoons like it the other night," Paradis said. "That crest is the insignia of the Hastings Light Infantry."

The nights were turning cold, so Margaret insisted on driving Sam to the high school for the *Pirates of Penzance* rehearsal. "We can't have you catching the flu now," she said. Then, idling at a traffic light, she put her head forward and began to weep over the steering wheel.

"I know," her husband said quietly.

"Who'll take care of you if they put me in jail?" she managed to say as the light changed and she let the car roll ahead.

"I don't think they will. Greb was reassuring. Justifiable homicide, probably."

"Do you think killing somebody is ever justified?"

"I'd have killed him had I been there."

"That doesn't answer my question."

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"Will you be happy with a suspended sentence?"

"Happy doesn't come into it."

A motorcycle roared past, the driver anonymous in helmet, gauntlets, and boots, his torso bundled in an ancient corduroy jacket with tattered leather patches on the elbows. The couple in the car spoke together. "Did you see that?"

Margaret stepped on the gas and followed the cyclist onto Pinnacle Street, down Victoria Hill, and onto Front Street, driving the short distance to where the main road becomes Station Street and leads to the railway yards and the canning factory. The young man had his helmet off and was walking toward the porch of a ramshackle frame cottage. The Masons parked and overtook him as he was finding his key.

"Pete Duffy, isn't it?" the teacher said, recalling his student from a few years ago.

"Mr. Mason!" The youth was taken by surprise. "Mrs. Mason! What are you doing here?"

"It's all right, Peter. We saw you go past and I recognized my jacket."

Duffy blushed. The only work going in Baytown right now for somebody his age was helping with the garbage collection. In school he had been better than good at basketball and a smart dancer. Now his job embarrassed him but he needed the money. "I'm sorry. I thought I could use it on the bike."

"Relax," Maggie said, "you're welcome to keep the jacket." Her sharp eyes noticed the brass wolf's-head ornament on the inside windowledge and she pointed at it. "But we'll have that back, if you don't mind."

Outside the high school, getting out of the car, Mason gave his wife a long look. "I don't like the idea of your going home alone."

"Neither do I."

"Why don't you come inside and watch me practice making a fool of myself on stage?"

She switched off, climbed out of the car, locked it, and followed her husband toward the big brick factory, its windows blazing with lights, students visible in the corridors hurrying about their extracurricular activities. For the first time in months, Margaret felt an upward lift of the spirit. "Taking one consideration with another," she said, opening the door and guiding her old man through, "this is probably a good thing to be doing."

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a *NEW* short story by

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After her mother died when Maggie was sixteen, Maggie Buckle went to live with widowed Granny Capaldi, who did all right from her dressmaking in a back room. "I won't charge you rent," said Granny, "if you don't nick no more than a fiver a week out of me purse, luvvie. Fair's fair."

Another novel story (not a contradiction in terms!) from Jeffry Scott, whose generous, diverse contributions to EQMM we consider a healthy part of our good fortune, and of yours . . .

A LOT OF BOTTLE

by JEFFRY SCOTT

By the time her unusually lovely daughter Maggie reached the age of fourteen, Rosa Buckle was driven to share forebodings with the parish priest.

After decades in the front line of London's dockland, Father Bryant was way ahead of Mrs. Buckle. He had eyes in his head, after all, as well as ears that monitored gossip. But also he was battle-fatigued to the verge of heresy. "Calm down," he advised. "Materially, Maggie will always do fine—for Maggie."

He was grimly aware of living in the real world. The Kingdom of Heaven's radiance might reduce his dismal East London sector of it to squalid, shadowed scenery, but it was there. Maggie Buckle, with her spectacularly glossy blue-black hair and flawless body, was designed to travel fast in that environment. How far and in what direction was another matter.

Poor Rosa Buckle—gross, shabby, ravaged by time and toil—turned eerily girlish for an instant when she whimpered, "Yuh, padre, but what about 'er *soul?* God forgive me, I think she's wicked."

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"Amoral." Father Bryant sighed wearily. "When it comes to doing the right thing, your Maggie might as well be color blind and tone deaf. That's defeatist and cynical, my dear, and deplorable theology, but sadly it's true. At least the girl's fond of you, Rosa."

There he was wrong. The only emotion Rosa inspired in Maggie was cool, measured gratitude for offering a stark warning. Rosa, in her daughter's view, was a wheezing, quivering, drooping cautionary tale—the writing on the wall.

At first, Maggie had giggled inwardly when older people said she was the image of her mother. Then she came across Rosa and Herbert Buckle's wedding photograph, treasured away in a tissue-paper packet along with their marriage lines and her mother's birth certificate. The archive might just as well have been a bundle of dynamite, fuse sputtering.

Because she *was* the image of Rosa. A Rosa whose oval face blazed out in loveliness from the swathing white bridal gown and who was curvily slender. Maggie Buckle had been rising thirteen when she made the discovery. She'd always assumed that her mother must be middle-aged going on elderly. Mums were just grownups, age irrelevant. Only it wasn't irrelevant. Rosa Buckle was hardly thirty-five years old.

"It's the Eye-talian blood," cackled Granny Capaldi, Rosa Buckle's mother, when Maggie obliquely raised the question. "Bless you, kid, we all go off once there's been a bun or two in the oven. Dunno, though—yer Auntie Irene was a nun, never looked at a feller, and she went to fat and turned plain as plain by the time she was twenty-five."

Granny Capaldi, like Father Bryant, fostered no illusions. But she was ribald with it. Nudging Maggie, she advised, "So enjoy what you got while you got it, know what I mean?"

Maggie knew, and *had* done from instinct while other little girls were picking their way through dolls, teddybears, and wistful longing for pretty party dresses.

It was all distressingly clear. Rosa had looked like Maggie when she'd been twenty. Maggie was sentenced to look like the present Rosa when she was thirty. Oh, she could diet and dress discreetly, but she'd be no more than passable, a matron to be looked at without wincing.

"Use it, Gran," she corrected abstractedly, her unobserved left hand deftly sliding a slender sheaf of pound notes from the old girl's handbag. "I'll use it, bugger the enjoyment . . ."

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Bert Buckle had worked for himself as a minor sub-contractor in the protection and general thuggery trade. Specialists should not desert their fields. Diversifying late in life into burglary, all the late Mr. Buckle achieved was a new definition of the phrase "safe breaking." He was hauling one out of a back window when it crushed him to death.

Luckily, in Maggie Buckle's book, her mother died of a heart attack the following year, when her daughter was sixteen. Maggie went to live with widowed Granny Capaldi, who did all right from her dressmaking in a back room. "I won't charge you rent," said Granny, "if you don't nick no more than a fiver a week out of me purse, luvvie. Fair's fair." Immune to shame or guilt, Maggie nodded unconcernedly.

The great thing was to go her own way.

Yet all she did for the next year or so was go to the bad—throwing herself into militant, tireless promiscuity. No man kept her, except in the financial sense, and then never for long. So in her eighteenth year, Maggie Buckle made two decisive moves. The first was leaving Granny Capaldi's roof to share a Central London apartment with a pair of older women. None of the trio went out very often, but as if to make up for that they entertained an uncanny number of male visitors. The second was to contact Steve Tuckey.

For nine people out of ten, especially females, that might have been difficult. But East London has its own version of the Old Boy Network and her father had done odd jobs for Tuckey. Maggie Buckle's request was, in the district argot, "in order," and so she got her meet.

Steve Tuckey had been around for a long time, ever since she could remember. He'd always put Maggie in mind of a giant lizard. Something to do with his nose, which was a minimal bump above a wide, near-lipless mouth, its nostrils neat dark pits more or less aimed at the onlooker.

Tuckey saw her in the tin-shed office on one of his dubious used-car lots. Maggie addressed him as "Mr. Tuckey" because he liked deference and would notice that she hadn't traded on the bygone Bert Buckle connection to call the gangster by his first name. "I've been on the game for months," she began. "Great money, but no future unless you're running the action. I'm going to start an escort service."

Steve Tuckey went on picking his teeth with a business card.

"You own that little office block by the canal," Maggie persisted.

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"Used to be a mail-order place and all the phones are still laid on there. Ideal for the escort lark. Lots of phones. No neighbors, so the girls can come and go all hours of the night. Well secluded but only twenty minutes from the West End hotels by black cab. Let me have it, transfer the lease to a front, no rent changes hands between us, and you can always say I'm in there on an illegal sublet."

Still wordless, Tuckey wagged his head as much in sarcastic amazement as refusal.

Maggie gave him a sharp look, slightly nonplussed. He had to see the advantages, surely? Her way, if she got busted (for various good reasons that was unlikely, but only fools relied on percentages) Steve Tuckey could not be implicated.

"No rent," she coaxed, "but we split the take sixty-forty. I get sixty because I run everything, pay the overheads, put my hands up and say sorry if the law gets naughty. It's a lot of money, Mr. Tuckey. I mean definitely tasty—enough to astonish you, and regular week in, week out."

Tuckey said: "Why cut me in then, if it's so tasty?"

Maggie was disappointed. Local talk was that Steve Tuckey had, in another dialect phrase, "a lot of bottle"—in other words, the appetite for and ability to perform violence—while his cousin and lieutenant, Max Fisher, was the brains. If Steve Tuckey was puzzled by her offer, then the rumors were correct and she would have to deal with two men instead of Tuckey alone.

Patiently she explained. "Like I said, I'll be making a packet of money. Give it a month, and the first bent coppers will be taking their earners to let me alone. Then some hound or other will want protection money or be putting the black on. Give it a year and the hounds will have me working for *them*.

"I go in with you and I get rent-free premises—a forty percent whack is enough without paying more on top. Fair's fair and we all know you're a fair man, Mr. Tuckey—hard but fair. Plus nobody's going to muscle in on your action—it's more than anybody in London would dare."

Tuckey's face darkened. He looked a shade more reptilian and immeasurably more dangerous. "Don't go buttering me up, you saucy little slag. Your dad never took that liberty with me and he wasn't half as sharp as you are."

Maggie cursed herself for forgetting that Steve Tuckey might not be swift but that didn't prevent him being sly and fitfully, selectively shrewd. Her head drooped, making her gorgeous mane ripple.

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"Sorry. Okay. I'd sooner have sixty percent or even just half a small fortune instead of a hundred percent of nothing—and my face striped or maybe my head kicked in for a bonus."

She looked up as there came a sound of rotten canvas ripping. It was Steve Tuckey, laughing heartily. Partly over catching her out, mainly in admiration.

She's straight, he thought. A right villain. Hungry and doesn't care who knows it. Nearly as smart as Max, I shouldn't wonder. He wiped his eyes. "You're on, gel. Fifty-fifty split, just to keep things simple. I forget complicated numbers, know what I mean? Cor, Max will do his nut when he gets back. He's a right old woman is Max Fisher. Keeps nagging me to go legit, build up the property dealing and video shops and that."

"But you're the boss," Maggie murmured as if to herself, a child thinking reassurance out loud. Steve Tuckey's expression hardened again and he started to say something before changing his mind. She wasn't trying to stir up trouble, just delighted at getting her own way. And as she'd said, he was the boss. Wasn't he?

"Jeez, I can't leave you alone for a minute!" Typically, Max Fisher masked real anger behind a joking version. That left room for retreat if Steve Tuckey lashed back at him. Max Fisher, a devout coward, had to be cautious. Trying to control Tuckey was analagous to surfboarding: you could borrow the sea's power, but oppose it directly and you were likely to end up bruised and bleeding, if not dead.

Steve Tuckey jerked a thumb at the wall safe. They were having drinks at his house in Rotherhithe. "Forty grand in there, and Maggie's hardly been going a month yet. Still getting girls and that."

"You've already *got* forty grand and more besides," Max pointed out dryly. "We've got enemies, Stevie-boy. Why give them targets? They'd love to see you nailed on a vice charge."

Smugly Steve Tuckey explained the roundabout route by which his cut of the operation reached him. No direct, provable connections.

Deceptively open, his handsome face sulky, Max Fisher threw himself into a chair. "Sure, I'd have insisted on all that anyway. But poncing, Steve, living off prostitution—"

Tuckey stared at him. "We've done worse stuff than whores in our day."

"Yesterday," Max countered. "Okay, this new tart's a goldmine—at present. You know the escort scene, Steve. More loose ends for the law and other villains to latch onto than chopped spaghetti. Tie up

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with Maggie Whatsername and you've got into bed with a bunch of greedy slags, their families, their ponces and fancy men, the cops they're scared of or have to pay off. See where we're going?"

To Max's despair, Tuckey fastened on the least important point. "Buckle. Her name is Maggie Buckle. Get to know her, Max. She's on the team, like it or not."

Max's pout vanished and was replaced by sunny eagerness to please. "Right you are. No sweat. You know I'm in your corner, Steve, always will be. Just looking out for your interests."

Unimpressed, Tuckey grunted. "Try doing what I tell you, Max. Maggie's *in*, better make the best of it."

Plain enough, and Max Fisher followed the advice. Yet he never quite knew what to make of Maggie Buckle. No matter what was said between them or what resulted, he was left with an obscure sense of having been wrong-footed.

He also sensed undercurrents. Sometimes he could swear that Maggie was not so much telling him things as being faintly impatient at his failure to understand matters so obvious that they needed no putting into words. It crossed his mind to take her to bed. Making her one of his women as well as Steve Tuckey's partner might restore Tuckey's sense of perspective. It ought not to be difficult, Max Fisher reasoned—he had charm, looks, and expertise, and while sex was Maggie's new profession it had long been her pastime. Later Max would shudder convulsively when contemplating his narrow escape from a truly catastrophic error of judgment. Meanwhile, he kept their relationship businesslike, senior management to junior executive.

And as Maggie had pledged and Steve Tuckey gloated, the money did roll in. Of course, there were snags, hitches, and alarms. Girls stole from clients, girls were thrown out of famous hotels or never got past the service entrance, girls skimmed the take or started poaching clients for themselves. Rival escort agencies bribed telephone engineers to sabotage Maggie's lines or divert calls to their own switchboards.

Maggie never came whimpering to Steve Tuckey over problems, but Max Fisher made it his concern to find out about them. Once Max said grudgingly, "Do you justice, Mag, everything seems to happen to you—but only the once. By rights you ought to have been busted or run out of business by now."

Maggie Buckle had been handling phones all night. The strain

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had made her hoarse, and merely very attractive instead of stunningly beautiful. Answering his implied question, she said, "I put in fourteen months and two weeks round the discos, pubs, and clubs. For every minute I spent on my back, there'd be an hour getting to know guys. Businessmen, hotel people, coppers, reporters. Got more names in my book than *Who's Who* and I bet they're a bloody sight more useful. Contacts, Max. I got more contacts and owe-me-ones than you'll ever dream."

Max Fisher smoothed his butter-colored hair and slid off the corner of her desk. "Any time my freezer breaks down, I'll know where to come. Talk about a cold one. Ultimate mercenary, that's you, Ms. Buckle."

"If you say so," Maggie assented demurely.

The escort agency had been running for a year when Steve Tuckey, driving back from the Royal Ascot races with Max Fisher, remarked, "You've never taken to the thing with Maggie, right?"

Max, who'd backed a winner in every race, decided not to push his luck. "Can't argue with money, Stevie-boy. I still think it could give us a black eye down the road. But it's also bought us that hotel, which diversifies us nicely."

Tuckey hadn't been listening. He grinned strangely. "Well, I'm knocking it on the head. Maggie closes down tonight." His pale fingers with the mashed knuckles tightened on the steering wheel. "Maggie's retiring, you might say. Getting married. Congratulate us, Max. You'll be best man, naturally."

His mind scrabbling for traction, Max Fisher blurted, "Know what you're taking on?"

Tuckey sounded bored and was not. "I'll only tell you the once: never expected to marry a virgin at my age. Wouldn't want to. Never expected to marry at all. But Maggie's different. She knows all there is about being a woman but she thinks like a feller. Near as much bottle as me, in her own way. And she's Bert Buckle's daughter—got more sense than to mess about. First, because I'd kill her and the bloke, slow. Second, I can give her the best part of thirty years—she plays her cards right, keeps me happy, Maggie will end up a very rich widow."

He grinned again. "Then *you* can marry her, Maxie. You've always done nicely out of having seconds from me."

"Leave off," Max mumbled.

Tuckey shrugged and drove on. "There's always a place for you,

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nothing changes. In fact, you'll come into your own. Always nagging me to go legit. That's the way it will be, son. Marry, settle down, go straight. Straightish. Here, you still ain't congratulated me."

After the honeymoon, Mr. and Mrs. Tuckey lived in some style, in a Wimbledon Hill mansion with an Asian maid and a Spanish couple as houseman and cook. Until he proposed, Maggie had assumed that Steve Tuckey was, as gossip columnists phrase it delicately, "a confirmed bachelor," his prime emotional release confined to orgasmic outbursts of temper. A year of marriage only slightly modified her suspicion. Tuckey had a genuine dislike of being touched. Companionship was what he craved.

She became resigned to playing a lot of two-handed canasta and rummy sessions that might last until the early hours. Tuckey emerged as an insomniac who demanded company. He did lower his guard with her a notch. "It's great to be with someone who isn't *after* something," he chortled during a marathon card game.

Maggie smiled and nodded, studying her cards. "Like Max, eh?"

"Oh, Max," he said dismissively. And a moment later, "But he's clever. We need him, luv. Especially now it's legit business, no funny stuff."

One night soon after their first anniversary, Tuckey was being solicitous, after his fashion. "Moody cow you are, Maggie. What's up your nose now, then?"

"It's just listening to you most evenings is like The Max Fisher Show," she retorted. "Max did this, Max pulled that diabolical stroke—"

"Give over." Tuckey was gratified, she could tell. "I do believe you're jealous, old luv."

Deliberately misunderstanding, Maggie said, "No business of mine what the two of you do behind closed doors."

The lizard hunched in on itself, dusty black eyes furious. "I never meant jealous that way! You let on I'm queer ever again, you'll need a dentist and a plastic surgeon and a bloody good divorce lawyer, because I'll kick your backside out the front door and change all the locks."

Maggie sighed. "Look, you're twice the man Max Fisher is—but he's too close, you don't see what he is. Like, you're always on about how crafty and ruthless he is. I'm the only one who'll tell you, darling—one of these days he'll be crafty and ruthless at your expense. That's the way he is, and he won't be able to resist."

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"Rubbish," Tuckey snarled. "That's another thing, Maggie—any more of that talk and you'll be out. I used to take Maxie to school after his Mum took sick, when he was just a little 'un. I made him."

She nodded contritely. "Yeah, I'm not in order, slagging poor Max. You made him, he made you, with his brains." For some reason, she noted, that didn't sit too well with her husband. He bridled, patently irritated by her form of surrender.

Thereafter she kept her disapproval and suspicion of Max Fisher to fractional frowns or a glazed look in the eyes. Thereafter Tuckey was more abrasive with Max—countermanding his instructions simply to prove who was master, arguing, sniping. Max strove harder to be ingratiating, which made Tuckey worse. And so the vicious carousel gained momentum.

Following a particularly unpleasant confrontation over nothing, Max Fisher went home early, beat up his wife, smashed a few knick-knacks and then retired into a hot bath with a bottle of Scotch.

He took stock of what had been going on and tried to discover reasons for it. The business was doing well—not brilliantly, now that the easy, illicit earning was over, but considering unemployment and the Thatcher government's unacknowledged recession not badly.

More to the point, if the police and every other authority raided the venture the following day, the most that could be proved about Steve Tuckey was that he was a tax-evader. No question of criminal charges, since he was no longer a criminal. Max's eyes narrowed and he drew aimless patterns in the condensed steam on the tiled wall at his side. That might be it. Steve Tuckey was an ignorant, primitive git. He missed the violence and the risk-taking.

Then again, Steve seemed well pleased with marriage and sexy Maggie, spent more and more time at Wimbledon with her. Which meant she had more influence with the gorilla. Was Maggie turning Tuckey against him?

Max pondered the concept, whisky firmly capped and ignored on the bathmat.

No, Maggie was smart. If she manipulated her husband into getting rid of his cousin-protege-planner, the business would go down the drain.

Considering alternatives, Max shook his head. Tuckey wouldn't accept Maggie as replacement thinker and director of the team. She suited Steve, he might even love her, but Steve Tuckey simply

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couldn't let a woman pull his strings. Maggie would be aware of that, it was too basic a character trait to miss. She wouldn't sabotage her own bandwagon.

Max, beginning to wrinkle from long immersion, cursed in frustration. It *must* be boredom that was making Tuckey impossible to work with. Boredom, and a growing suspicion that he was redundant in any civilized form of business.

All right, he would have to find some means of diverting and entertaining the brute. That brought Max back to Maggie. The more he thought about it, the less he believed that she was hostile to him. Back in the escort-agency era, they'd gotten along fine. Max, deliberately reducing vanity in a bid to be objective, felt that, if anything, Maggie quite liked him—as much as a cold-blooded whore like her liked anyone. And why not? He was attractive, and suave when he put himself out.

Slightly heartened, he sat up and opened the bottle. Diversion. Like one of those global cruises on a liner. If Maggie proposed it, Steve might well bite. Max experienced physical hunger for three months of getting on with his job in Tuckey's absence.

It always worked—hot tub, relaxation, thought. Max had it. Steve Tuckey was going up North to inspect his recently bought string of greyhounds and bully their trainer. He would overnight at Leeds. Perfect. Max Fisher, knowing nothing of chess but some of the jargon, reflected that to keep the king in check you needed to get on the right side of the queen.

The Spanish houseman was downcast and fearful on opening the door. Tuckey bellowed announcement of his return—it was unlike Maggie not to be there in the hall. He tramped upstairs to seek her out. She was slumped before the bedroom mirror, her face pallid, her hair a neglected mess. Seeing his reflection, she simply twitched the terrycloth robe off her shoulders, leaving her back naked to the waist. Naked, scratched, and bruised.

She spoke dully. "Max was here last night. He started some rigamarole about only wanting what was best for you. As soon as he twigged I was alone, he tried to have me."

It took Tuckey a long while to catch his breath. "Never. *Max?* Never!"

"Okay, I did this to myself." She lifted the robe tenderly over the livid claw marks. "He tried to rape me, Steve. I had to lock myself

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in the bathroom. He sat here trying to wait me out—then he heard Inez and Juan's car pulling in."

Idiotically, Tuckey said, "But he knew I was up North—why come here at all?"

Maggie smiled bitterly. Flushing, he accused, "You must've led him on somehow."

She swiveled on the stool. "Grow up, Steve. I'm not daft. I just want to go on living, no problems, no hassles, with my face and my legs in one piece, thank you very much. D'you really think I'd try to start something with your best mate? One, I don't even fancy the berk. Two, you and Max know each other better than anybody else in the world—he couldn't cover up, you couldn't help but find out. Three, if I did cheat I certainly wouldn't do it in your own house, with staff coming back any minute."

Tuckey snarled, "Four, five, six-bloody-seven! What the hell got into him? All right, you're tasty, dead sexy. But Max could have any woman he wanted—not to mention the ones around he can buy."

Her monotone, the apathy of shock, scraped Tuckey's nerves. "Just remember he only tried, I never let him."

He made a fly-shooing gesture. "Sure, sure, none of this is down to you. I'll kill the bastard."

"If you can find him." Maggie took his hands until he looked down at her. "Listen, Max Fisher knows I'm the only one who realizes what he's up to—that he'll use you and stab you in the back. I reckon he thought that if he took me to bed I'd keep quiet. Too scared to make waves, in case you ever found out."

Pulling free, Tuckey barged out of the room, the house.

To his enraged amazement, Max Fisher hadn't run for his life. Max was behind his desk in their new office.

"I'm back," Tuckey gasped. He was having trouble breathing right, let alone speaking. "Anything doing, son?"

Trotting around the desk, Max smiled boyishly. "Nothing that can't keep."

Tuckey seemed to be seeing him for the first time. Liar, traitor. He hit Max in a blindly angry reflex action—not to wound or hurt, but with a savagely urgent need for Fisher to be gone, to be anywhere but directly in front of him with that false smile and sick, overtly sincere gaze.

The punch snapped Max's head back at an acute angle and his skull impacted against the wall. Not even the pathologist could be

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utterly certain about the sequence of those two events. The question was an academic one for Max Fisher. Tuckey was still kicking the corpse when the secretary and the receptionist jammed in the street exit, hysterical with fright and horror, screaming hard enough to bring a passing constable running.

Tuckey went to prison for a long time. His record was bad, and that offset the fact that he'd kept out of trouble for years. Not young when he started the sentence, he stoops and shuffles. His wife, visiting him regularly, reflects with covert satisfaction that senility must be in the wings.

She runs the businesses. "Most fun I've had with my clothes on," she once confided to Granny Capaldi. "Or off, for that matter."

Just as she used to dread, Maggie has become stout and palpably plainer. Much she cares. Food and booze apart, Maggie's sole indulgence after twelve-hour office days is to devour romantic novels.

She's aware of the irony. The more starry-eyed the trashy story, the more she enjoys it, quivering with sardonic mirth. The cream of the jest being that on the one occasion she was swept away by emotion and let her heart rule her head, it was the making of her.

She fell for Max Fisher as soon as she set eyes on him. She concealed her infatuation because he was worthless and she wanted to make money before declaring herself and buying him.

Then Steve Tuckey proposed. Maggie couldn't refuse. Tuckey as husband, lord, and master might be a daunting proposition, but a rejected Tuckey was likely to be lethal. Maggie assumed that fear and prudence would kill her taste for Max Fisher.

But the craziness, like malaria, never went away for good. The night Max called to make Maggie his ally, it was too strong for her. She threw herself at him, begging him to elope with her. She had money put away, they could live abroad and get by somehow. Max had been horrified.

"You never said nothing, I never heard you!" he gabbled as he fled the house. "I wasn't here, it never happened!"

Maggie hated him before the front door slammed. Not for the snubbing, but for making her acknowledge that her nature ruled that the person she loved best in all the world was Maggie. Now Max was a human time bomb that must be defused, destroyed. Whatever he said, Max could never hide things from Steve Tuckey. Sooner or later, Tuckey would learn the truth. Maggie had to get in first with her version of the incident.

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It worked better than she could have hoped. Max Fisher dead, Steve Tuckey neutralized and confined, Maggie top of the heap. As the romantic novels lied so sweetly and insistently, love could conquer all.

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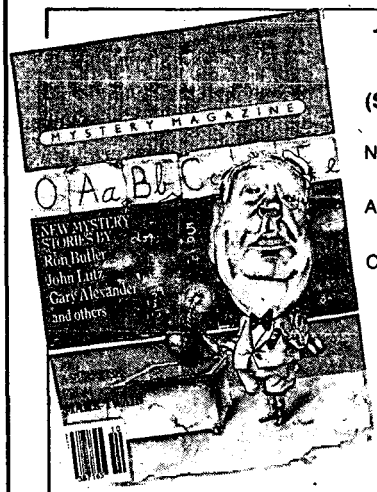

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a *NEW* Em Grady story by

JANE BOSWORTH

We first encountered Jake McEwan in the second story about spunky widow Em Grady, "Skinning Varmits," in the August 1983 issue. "Jake's a likeable old coot," Em reflected at the time. "Used to be on stage. To ladies who fall for his line a bull, he's wiry. To those a us with the sense God give us, he's a skinny reprobate who looks like a cross between an old salt an' a plantation owner." Em seems to have undergone a change of heart in the intervening months, though she appears to be fighting it—a little . . .

SCRUFFIN' SCOUNDRELS

by JANE BOSWORTH

Sheriff Bowen come a lumberin' into my rock shop with his chin restin' on his chest an' them tumbleweed eyebrows a his knitted together in thought.

Musta been a rough night, I thought, an' set his cup a coffee on the counter. "Mornin', Bill," I chirped.

Got me somethin' less than a grunt an' a glower in return.

"Hard night?" I asked.

"Ain't you got no sweetener?" he growled.

"Never knowed you to take sugar."

He shed a look a pure disgust on me. "Not sugar, Em," he says. "Booze."

"Ain't you still on duty?"

Them grey eyes a his seized a hold a mine, but they didn't let loose of anythin' he was feelin'. Got me to wonderin' iffen this wasn't a professional call he was makin'.

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"Somethin' festerin' you?" I asked.

"Been hearin' things," he said. "About you and that scoundrel, Jake McEwan."

"What things?"

"Heard the two of you went to New York a while back."

"I ain't exactly underaged, sheriff."

"Heard the two a you was holed-up in Flagstaff the weekend Jake's house got broke into. Lucky for Jake that some good Samaritan tipped the sheriff to the break-in. Unlucky for that drug dealer to get caught inside tryin' to unlock the bracelets his hoods was wearin'. Never did get to the bottom of who handcuffed them men or who planted coke in the back of the dealer's car. Did get a name, though. One a them hoods recollected the name Grady bein' used. Ain't that your name?"

"Coincidences will happen, sheriff."

"Heard that a crooked jeweler over in Prescott got busted for sellin' phony stones right after this little old lady and her dandied-up boy friend bought and sold back three one-carat diamonds. Funny how your description matches that little old lady."

"You accusin' me, Bill?"

"Let's just say I got my suspicions. When are you seein' Jake again?"

"Sometime today. He's takin' me to Phoenix for lunch. Why?"

"I need some undercover work done," he said. "An' I figure you and Jake McEwan is perfect for the job."

Danged iffen them words didn't send chills clear down to my toes. I never knowed Sheriff Bill to need nobody's help. He took a stack a papers outa his folder an' set 'em on the counter. Top one was a complaint a theft from the Oaktree Inn Retirement Hotel. The rest was concernin' that inn, too, an' each one a them complaints had been filed by the relative a someone that'd died within a week or so. One a them folks passed on two days after movin' in. Seems that when their executors begun inventoryin' the estates, certain valuables turned up missin'. Mostly untraceable valuables.

"I got no way a protectin' you," Sheriff Bowen said, "an' no guarantees that anythin' you find will be admissible in court, but I got a reporter who's willin' to print anythin' you dig up. There's also a sizeable reward bein' offered for the recovery of certain properties. What do you say, Em?"

"Reckon me an' my old gigolo could use us a good rest. Reckon the Oaktree Inn's as good a place as any for restin'."

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He give me a list a three things that might be traceable. First was a block a Exposition stamps a the Eads Bridge over the Mississippi River that had a christenin' date a 12/1/98 inked on the back a each stamp. Second was six double eagles that'd been certified an' photographed by the American Numismatic Association. The last were three thousand-ounce Englehard silver bars that had their assay numbers listed. They was all family heirlooms relatives swore was to be passed on.

"Iffen we find them, what then?" I asked.

"Call this number," he said an' give me a card. "Wes Johnson at the *Sedona Sentinel* will start the ball rollin' in the media. As you always say, Em, they's more than one way a scruffin' scoundrels."

I called up the Oaktree Inn an' made a reservation for Jake an' Emily McGrady. Told 'em Jake'd be havin' open-heart surgery an' would be needin' a place to rest up in. Sheriff choked on his coffee when I said that.

"Em," he said after I hung up, "them folks at that inn didn't just fall offa no turnip truck. We're dealin' with crooks that's smart enough to steal stuff we can't always prove existed. Even when we got proof it existed, we can't find it—an' if we found it, we couldn't prove it wasn't legally sold by its late owner. Actin' ain't gonna cut it when it comes to open-heart surgery."

Done me some soul-searchin' on that an' old Doc Parady come a saunterin' into my mind. Kinda figured he owed me a favor or two for all them meals I cooked for him right after his Anna died.

"Doc Parady will help," I said. "He an' my Elmer was closer than a pair a hibernatin' rattlers. Doc's been keepin' track a me ever since Elmer died."

"Em," the sheriff said 'fore he left, "I don't want nothin' happenin' to my favorite little old lady. Call me if you get in over your head."

I told him not to worry an' set about doin' what was needed. Called Doc an' got us a appointment for that afternoon. 'Tweren't hard gettin' in to see him 'cause Doc's all but retired. Just keeps his shingle out for oldsters that don't trust nobody else. He an' my Elmer used to prospect the great Mohave together, searchin' for who knows what an' draggin' home with nothin' but hangovers.

I packed a bag, locked up the rock shop, an' went out onto the porch to wait for Jake. 'Tweren't long till that fancy Mercedes a his was spittin' back dust in my parkin' lot. It come to a stop an' Jake got outa it an' walked up the stairs. Danged iffen that blue-suede

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sportcoat he had on didn't give his eyes a sapphire tint. He's as heart-throbbin'-handsome a man as I ever laid eyes on.

His eyes settled onto my bag an' that old-salt's smile a his settled into place. "Emily, my sweet, did you change your mind about spending the night with me?"

"Reckon so," I said an' hefted my bag.

He took it from me, walked to the car, an' put it in the trunk on top a his own cases. His chest puffed out like a toad 'bout to croak when he shut down that lid. He strutted back an' opened the door for me. "Emily, my love," he cooed, "my dreams are about to come true."

I got in an' sat watchin' as he shut my door an' give me a bantam-rooster strut 'round the nose a the car. He got in behind the wheel an' sat caressin' that fancy leather steerin' wheel a his. The devil was crowsfootin' cross the corner a his eyes an' I knowed just 'bout what he was thinkin'. Ain't nothin' more ridiculous than a man puffed out with the thought a conquest.

"Emily, darling," the words sugared offa his tongue, "do you have a preference when it comes to hotels?"

"Yep. Even got us a reservation."

He shed a look a pure satisfaction on me. "Where to, love?" he asked.

"The Oaktree Inn."

Danged iffen them words didn't slap the smile offa his lips an' send the devil scurryin' for cover. Suspicion crept onto his face. "Did you forget to tell me something, dear?" he asked.

"We'll be stoppin' in Jerome at Doc Parady's," I said.

He took my hand in his an' patted it. "Emily, are you ill?" he asked.

"Nope, but you are. Leastways that's what me an' Sheriff Bowen decided. Drive on, love, an' I'll tell you all 'bout it."

I told him everything 'cept the bit 'bout his comin' surgery. Jake's got this thing 'bout the sight a blood so I figured to let Doc break the news to him. Somehow, Jake got it in his head that he'd be stagin' a heart attack an' that stirred up the ham in him. Said he'd stop at his house in Sedona to pick up his makeup kit.

"That ain't all we'll be needin'," I said. "Reckon we'll be needin' a one-of-a-kind antique that ain't more than two inches high an' a inch wide. Figure it oughta be made a solid gold an' trimmed with emeralds. You got anythin' like that?"

"I won't let you have my dollhouse throne," he said. "It isn't even

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legally mine to loan. It belongs to the Rosenbergs of Bastogne. I only kept it out of Hitler's hands."

"You ain't gonna find that family after all these years. It's the only traceable thing either a us owns. It'll have to do."

The faraway look on Jake's face told me he was back in Bastogne with Brigadier General McAuliffe, holdin' out till the U.S. Third Army rolled in. When pride give way to pain, I knowed his young Jewess was dyin' in his arms again. I set my hand on his shoulder an' watched pain give way to comfortin'. Johanna Rosenberg musta been beautiful. Jake settled down to his drivin'.

"Emily," he said, "you are the most determined woman I have ever known."

By the time we pulled into Jerome, the sun was glitterin' offa the Mingus Mountain, givin' its calico hide a sequined finish. We skirted the parkin' lot full a tourist cars an' buses, turned left, an' went up the hill to Doc's Victorian mansion he bought in '32 jus' after the United Verde Mine shut down. House overlooks the graveyard where Parady's wife an' two sons is restin'. We parked out front an' went on into the house into a deserted parlor. Heard somebody peckin' out letters on a typewriter an' followed the sound into a office. Doc was sittin' at his desk, typin'. He heard us come in, looked up, an' grinned into his bushy white beard. Then he pulled the paper outa the machine, paper-clipped a card to the top, an' handed it to me.

"Jake McGrady's death certificate," he said. "Made it out just in case you'll be needin' it. 'Course, the time a death is still blank. The card at the top is for an ambulance service run by a poker buddy a mine. If you need him, just mention my name."

"This here's the dead man," I said an' nodded toward Jake. "Real name's—"

"Jake McEwan," Doc interrupted an' give me one a his all-knowin' winks. "So you're the man folks up Emily's way are waggin' their tongues about. Seems like you two are more interestin' than the soaps to some a the old biddies in Congress. I hope that at least part of what they say is true. For Emily's sake, a course."

Danged iffen them words didn't make me want to find out who said what an' stuff it back down their throats.

Jake was standin' there, thumbin' his beltloops, sheddin' the airs of a conquerin' hero into the room. Doc looked from Jake to me an' his face took on a approvin' look—the same look my granddaddy

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give me the first time I brung my Elmer home to meet him. Made me feel as awkward as a doe-eyed teenager.

"You can take my word for it," Jake said to Doc. "At least some of what you've heard is true."

The two men had a laugh on that one. Then Doc hand-motioned for us to set in the chairs facin' his desk. Soon as we settled in, the smile melted offa his face an' I knowed he'd turned professional on me.

"Regardin' Jake's up-and-comin' illness," he said. "There are several problems with it. Emily, you should have consulted me before callin' the inn, but we'll just have to make the best of a bad situation. First, we'll have to shave the hair off Jake's chest and legs—"

Jake sat bolt upright.

"Then we'll have to paint him with an antiseptic which sometimes causes blisters on sensitive skin—"

Jake's jaw fell open.

"Then we'll need several small cuts in his legs—"

All the color drained offa Jake's cheeks an' his eyes went wide.

"An' one large incision from the top a the breastbone to the bottom a the ribcage."

"Incision!" Jake shouted. "Cuts! Shaving! Emily, what did you volunteer me for?"

"Open-heart surgery."

"Open-heart sur—" He 'bout choked on the word. "Emily, you can't be serious!" He looked to Doc for help an' found none. Doc sat there lookin' as noncommittal as one a them fat-cat specialists does when he lowers the boom an' tells you whatever ails you will cost fifteen thousand dollars to fix.

Jake's eyes narrowed on me. "I am not about to have my body carved upon. Not even for you, Emily."

"An' I'm not about to carve up a healthy body," Doc said. "I'm merely makin' a point about laywomen givin' away illnesses. The answer to our problem is as old as man himself an' almost as pesky. Since pneumonia is the greatest post-operative threat to the open-heart patient, the common cold will rescue your hide."

"Thank God for the common cold," Jake said. His whole body relaxed and then tensed. He took in little snuffin' breaths, then he let out a big sneeze an' grinned.

That sneeze broke the tension in the room an' knocked the professionalism outa Doc.

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"Take two aspirin," he said. "Rest in bed and call me as soon as you're dead. I have to know if you catch the crooks."

We agreed to do it an' Doc walked us out to the car. He stood wavin' till we turned outa sight. Reckon life's been mighty lonely for him since his Anna died. Thinkin' on that made me reach out an' touch Jake. He give me a hand to hold.

We stopped at Jake's house in Sedona to pick up the things we needed an' change drivers. Jake held up the little throne so's little beams a sunlight reflected offa it onto the dash. Prettiest little thing I ever seen. Recollected Jake sayin' how's it was over four hundred years old an' come from the house a Henry IV of France. Jake wrapped it in his handkerchief an' put it in the front pocket a his sportcoat.

"Memory's a funny thing," he said. "It gives a value all its own to objects that trigger it. I should hate to lose that throne."

It was a little after one by the time we pulled up in front a the Oaktree Inn an' I seen for the first time what it was 'bout the inn that had environmentalists hoppin' mad. It's one a them concrete-an'-steel beehives meant for sealin' folks into secured cubbyholes an' it sticks out like a sore thumb in a land sculptured by wind an' water. They'd leveled a grove a oaks an' changed the course of a creek to build it.

Men in blue uniforms checked our name against a list, unloaded our luggage, an' brung a wheelchair out for Jake. Whilst he was bein' wheeled into the buildin', I parked the car. I walked back into the lobby jus' in time to see this duded-up man in a pin-striped suit an' alligator shoes wheelin' Jake outa a huge vault they got in there. A sleek-lookin' lady with bunned grey hair was walkin' along beside Jake an' the two a them was jawin' 'bout somethin' that had their hands talkin', too. When Jake seen me comin', he dug out his handkerchief an' sneezed into it. The lady patted him on the shoulder. The man parked him at a waist-high counter an' give him some cards to fill out. I walked over to him.

"Ah, there you are," Jake nasaled. "Emily, I want you to meet Mr. Silverston, the new manager of the inn. And this lovely lady is Miss Ferguson, the assistant manager."

Silverston nodded. "So nice to meet you," Miss Ferguson gushed. "Jake and I were just discussing a recent vacation I took to—"

"Miss Ferguson," Silverston interrupted, "I'm sure the McGradys are tired after their trip here and would like to get themselves settled

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in their suite." Without waitin' for a reply, he continued: "You will be housed in our west wing near our twenty-four-hour infirmary. There is a doctor on call there should you have need of him."

He handed Jake a key an' a sealed manila envelope. "All of our rooms here at the inn have floor safes. The location and combination to yours is in that envelope. If you lose the combination, there will be a fifty-dollar service charge to call in a locksmith to open it. We don't keep the combinations here. Lunch is still being served in the dining room. I hope you enjoy your stay with us. Miss Ferguson, show them the direction to their suite."

He turned an' walked away.

"Cold, ain't he?" I said.

"But he's terribly efficient," Miss Ferguson said. "Everything, I mean *everything* here at the inn has its place and the records are meticulously kept. But I mustn't keep you. Your suite is on the first floor of the west wing." She smiled at Jake. "I'll get you that travel information you asked for. I'm sure you and Mrs. McGrady will enjoy Hawaii as much as I did when you're well enough to travel again. I heartily recommend the Majestic Hotel to you. Its address and phone number are on one of my receipts. I save everything."

Jake thanked her an' I got him rollin' in the right direction.

"You thinkin' on goin' to Hawaii?" I asked.

"It's lovely this time of year," he answered.

I picked up speed as I crossed the lobby an' I woulda had us goin' a pretty good clip iffen a maid's cart hadn't been blockin' the aisle to the west wing. Found out that stoppin' a chair is harder than it looks. Dang near dumped Jake on the floor.

"I do wish you'd slow down, Emily," he said.

I woulda said somethin' 'bout gigolos an' fast women 'ceptin' for the sign on a open door my eyes snagged. It was Silverston's room. I peered inside an' didn't see or hear nothin' that'd tell me there was a maid inside, so I left Jake and moseyed on in. Turned right at the first door an' ended up in Silverston's den. Papers on his desk was stacked jus' so an' all his pencils was perfectly sharpened. Ever'thin' in that room had a place a its own an' they weren't a speck a dust anywhere. Musta been the order a the room that made me notice that not all the light switches matched. Some a them looked whiter than others. Newer. An' why does a room need two switches on every wall? I woulda taken a closer look iffen I hadn't heard Jake's voice an' a woman's voice comin' from the hallway. I skedaddled on outa there.

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A maid was movin' her cart aside. She apologized for blockin' the aisle an' I give Jake a shove.

"Find anything?" he asked.

"Just a whole lotta light switches in a room with only two lights. Seems mighty peculiar for a man as neat as Silverston to have too many of anythin'."

Jake didn't say nothin'. He opened the manila envelope an' read over the paper inside it whilst I pushed him down the hall. Soon as we was safely inside our suite, he leaped outa the chair an' beelined for the spare bedroom. When I caught up with him, he was on his hands an' knees in the closet, twistin' the dial on the floor safe. Danged thing wouldn't open. He musta tried ten times.

He sat back on his heels an' studied that slip a paper. Then he handed it to me. "Look at the third number," he said.

I seen a 38.

"Now look at the rest of the numbers."

I didn't see nothin' strange in them an' said so. Jake jus' had hisself a good laugh 'bout that. Then he said somethin' 'bout agin' an' spectacles that raised my blood pressure a notch or two. I started to say somethin' an' got shushed. He twisted the dial on the safe again an' this time the thing opened. He grinned.

"The third number on this paper is lighter than the rest," he said. "It's not the original, it's a photocopy. It looks like someone used liquid correction fluid on the original, typed in a new third number, and photocopied the original. Three eight was transposed from eight three. The pieces are beginning to fit together, Emily my sweet. I now know where the stolen valuables were kept. All I have to figure out is who our thief or thieves are."

He stood, walked outa the room, an' locked hisself in the master bedroom. I heard him talkin' an' knowed they was nobody there so I figured he musta called somebody on the phone. I pressed my ear to the door but couldn't hear nothin' so I went searchin' for a glass. By the time I found one, Jake was back in the livin' room slouched in his chair, lookin' like somethin' the Grim Reaper had felled an' forgotten to harvest.

"What is you up to?" I asked.

He checked his watch. "If we hurry," he said, "we should be able to finish our soup before the ambulance arrives. Our reporter should arrive just in time to see me rolled out of here. Push on to lunch, dear Emily, and I'll tell you all about it."

Whilst I pushed, Jake jawed 'bout how all them things got stole

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outa the inn. Iffen he was right 'bout none a the safes workin' in the west wing, then our suspects was narrowed down to them that had access to the manila envelopes. Seems like the finger a guilt was pointin' right at Miss Ferguson an' Mr. Silverston.

Miss Ferguson seen me wheelin' Jake cross the lobby an' come runnin' up. She give Jake a folder full a travel information an' scurried back to her post at the check-in counter. Jake thumbed through the folder an' pulled out a brochure on the Majestic Hotel. They was a receipt inside it.

"Emily," he said, "when this is over, we shall go and stay at the Majestic."

I pushed him into the dinin' room an' a young hostess showed us to a table. She asked us how we liked the inn. When Jake told her 'bout our safe not workin', I seen her face cloud up.

"You must be in the west wing," she said. "I swear, none of the safes on that wing work. I'll tell Mr. Silverston he's got another one to have fixed."

She noted the number on our key an' left. The waiter come an' Jake ordered our lunch. We was just settlin' down to our salads when I seen the first twinges a pain cross Jake's face. By the time the soup got there, they was buildin' into waves that was crashin' into his chest. I loosened his tie. His breathin' started comin' in shallow an' his skin paled. A crowd begun to form 'round him.

"Unbutton his shirt," someone said.

"Call an ambulance."

"Anybody know cardiopulmonary resuscitation?"

By the time the stretcher was rolled in, Jake's skin was cold an' clammy. His eyes was flutterin' at the whites. They lifted him onto the stretcher an' rolled him outa there. I trailed along behind. Jake McGrady died on the way to the hospital.

Ten hours later, I was back at the inn inside the vault with Silverston. We was openin' up the safety deposit box that matched the key Jake had on him.

"Normally we don't do this," Silverston was saying, "unless the tax man is present, but you were here for such a short time."

"I didn't even know he had it," I said an' bellowed into my handkerchief.

Silverston took out the box an' set it on a footstool. His face took on the plastic sympathy of a local mortician who's gettin' ready to discuss prices. "If you'd prefer the privacy of a booth," he said.

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" 'Tain't necessary," I said an' flipped open the lid.

They was five one-thousand-dollar bills inside. I stuffed them inside my pocketbag an' turned the box upside down. Nothin' else came out so I took both keys outa the slots on the door to the box an' turned them over in my hand. I took the one without a number on it an' slipped it into the keyhole of another box in the vault. Danged iffen it didn't open that box. I reached for the key an' Silverston slapped my hand away.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

"Checkin' out somethin' Jake said 'bout these here boxes. Seems like grave robbin'd be mighty easy in a place like this."

Silverston begun easin' in on me, forcin' me toward the back of the vault. The look on his face sent shivers clear to my toes, but I ain't one to back down. I stopped back-pedalin'.

Silverston stopped, too. "Grave robbing?" he said.

"Grave robbin'," I said. "You got yourself a master key to a gold mine in that there key you don't want me to touch. A mine salted by rich old folks that die in your inn. Folks who stowed their valuables here 'cause their safes wouldn't open. Jake an' me is gonna be wantin' more than the return of our little gold throne. We got us—"

"Your husband's dead," he interrupted. "The death certificate—"

"Is phony. Now as I was sayin', we got us a few partners a our own that'll be wantin' a cut a the take you get from grave robbin'."

Them brown eyes a his narrowed on mine an' his hands clenched an' unclenched whilst he mulled over my words.

"Where's the old man?" he asked.

"Got hisself a 'lectrician's job takin' apart light switches. Ought to be 'bout done by now."

Silverston lit on outa there faster than a jack rabbit runnin' for cover. I hurried after him an' caught up jus' after he went into his den. Jake an' this other younger feller was in there sortin' through coins an' stamps an' jewelry stacked on the desk. They was checkin' each item against a page in a record book. Silverston looked at the book an' swallowed hard.

Jake looked at him. "Everything in your life has a precise place," he said. "Paper in the center drawer. Files in the bottom right. Record books in the bottom left. Loot hidden behind false light switches. Miss Ferguson was right, you do keep meticulous records. Where are the silver bars whose assay numbers are listed in this book?"

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Silverston looked from one of us to the other. Then his eyes settled on the tall blond young man with the military bearin'. He threw back his head an' laughed. It was a ugly laugh. "You're cops," he said. "*Stupid* cops. Breaking and entering will do more than throw your case out of court—it'll cost you your badges."

"I'm too old for police work," Jake said. "Mr. Silverston, meet Wes Johnson from the *Sedona Sentinel*. It was him that reported the break-in at your apartment. He stumbled on it when he was searchin' for a new widow in the west wing. He's an obituary reporter."

Wes Johnson stepped 'round the desk, grabbed Silverston's hand, an' give it a pump or two, grinnin' real wide. "Tell us where the silver bars are," he said, "and I'll give you a headstart on the sheriff who's due here any minute."

Got to hand it to Silverston, he knowed when he was beat. He opened the floor safe in his closet for us an' then lit on outa there. Jake's little gold throne was in there, settin' on a base a silver bars. Jake pocketed it an' set the bars on the desk.

He looked from me to Johnson. "Emily and I would prefer not to get involved in the discovery of this stuff," he said.

"Then go home," the reporter said. "Leave everything to me. I'll think of something to tell the sheriff."

Jake an' me drove to his house in Sedona. It'd been a long day an' I was plumb tuckered, but I knowed sleep would never come iffen Jake didn't tell me how he knowed it was Silverston an' not Miss Ferguson.

"The receipt from the Majestic Hotel told me," he said. "Miss Ferguson was in Hawaii the week the third victim moved into the inn, died, and had his silver bars stolen. She couldn't have been our thief. Now, dear, can we please get some sleep?"

I have never slept sounder.

The smell of mornin' coffee jerked me awake an' I seen Jake standin' beside my bed with a tray in his hands. He set the tray on the nightstand an' sat down beside me. He handed me the mornin' paper an' I seen a picture a Sheriff Bill an' Wes Johnson standin' behind a desk piled high with loot. Below them was a picture a Silverston an' a caption, *Have you seen this man?* I read the story.

"Fancy that," I said when I finished. "Who'd a ever thought a obituary reporter woulda stumbled on a robbery in progress an' scared the burglars outa the patio doors. Too bad he didn't get a

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close look at them burglars. Imagine findin' all that loot piled up on Silverston's desk with him not around to claim it."

"Imagine Mr. Johnson giving our reward to charity," Jake said an' sighed. "Now I haven't enough money to take my favorite lady to Hawaii. But maybe she'll go with me to Phoenix like she promised." They was a pleadin' in his eyes that minded me of a Rockwell I seen once of a little boy askin' his mother iffen he could keep the ragged pup in his arms.

I reached down beside the bed an' grabbed hold a my pocketbag. Took the five thousand outa it an' give it to Jake. "Found it in your safety deposit box," I said. "Kinda figure Silverston put it there to waylay any suspicions I mighta had. Reckon the hula might wrench me some, but I'm game for it iffen you are."

The devil come waltzin' into his eyes an' that old-salt's smile a his settled into place. "Emily, my love, I am an excellent masseur. I assure you the hula will never be your downfall." But I might be, them prideful eyes a his seemed to say.

Maybe so, I thinks to myself. Maybe so. But agin' could be downright lonely iffen you was to become too afraid a fallin' to take a chance on livin'. Besides, it ain't my style to be afraid.

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX

by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Use of historical figures as sleuths in mystery fiction has become frequent and diverse enough to provide someone with the substance for a tidy study. Edgar Allan Poe and Benjamin Franklin come to mind, and we begin with five others—a president, a first lady, a philosopher, an opera star, and a policeman.

Bully! by Mark Schorr (St. Martin's, $12.95) introduces Theodore Roosevelt, who investigates a murderous plot to end his presidency in 1903. Roosevelt's policies are upsetting the Democrats and his own party, not to mention robber barons at home and national powers abroad. Out of this malignant stew come attempts on his life. In disguise and in danger, Teddy and James White, a Rough Rider who fought with him on San Juan Hill, prowl the underworlds of New York and Washington. This makes excellent, credible reading.

Eleanor Roosevelt returns for a second time in *The Hyde Park Murder* by Elliott Roosevelt (St. Martin's, $14.95). This is much stronger, more atmospheric, and more interesting than the first, *(Murder and the First Lady),* and altogether a pleasurable experience. Eleanor opens these 1935 proceedings by defending a pair of young lovers: Adriana van der Meer's father forbids her even to speak to Bob Hannah, whose father has been indicted in a stock swindle. Matters quickly descend to murder, and the First Lady, with President Franklin Roosevelt much in evidence, uses the powers of the new Securities and Exchange Commission (under Joe Kennedy) to dislodge a powerful conspiracy.

Lillian de la Torre has been crafting her superb renderings of the Eighteenth Century and the detections of Dr. Sam: Johnson since 1944. Most of the tales appeared first in this magazine and were collected as *The Detections of Dr. Sam: Johnson* (1960) and *Dr. Sam: Johnson, Detector* (1946). Now, after twenty-five years, comes a third collection: *The Return of Dr. Sam: Johnson, Detector* (International Polygonics, $4.95). The philosopher turned detective has never been in better form than in these seven stories, the London of Johnson and Boswell never more vividly alive, the investigations—based as they are on actual events—never more convincing. Not to be missed on any account.

Enrico Caruso, who first appeared in Barbara Paul's *A Cadenza for Caruso,* now returns in *Prima Donna at Large* (St. Martin's, $15.95). The year is 1915, the setting is the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and the narrator is Geraldine Farrar, star soprano. Europe is at war, and French baritone Philippe Duchon comes to the U.S. for refuge. His overpowering egotism poisons the Met and every-

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one comes quickly to despise him. A goodly dose of ammonia in his throat spray takes care of Duchon, bringing on Lieutenant O'Halloran of the New York police. The lieutenant's first act, based on previous experience with Caruso, is to forbid the tenor from doing any detecting, on threat of spending his next musical season in the slammer, so Enrico gets Farrar to do his nosing around. This is a lively, amusing, and very effective portrait of the personalities and passions of the American opera scene of those World War I years.

François Vidocq was a thief turned policeman in Nineteenth Century France, the head of the Surete Nationale. We come to Paris in the shimmering heat of summer in 1823, to the murder of a jeweler, to the killing of a famous courtesan, to the theft of a bracelet from the wrist of a beautiful young American, to the looting of furniture from great homes in the French countryside. These are the matters set before Vidocq and his men, reformed (mostly) criminals all, in *I Am Vidocq* by Vincent McConnor (Dodd, Mead, $16.95). This police procedural is ably executed, with only a disconcerting predilection to incomplete sentences to mar the narrative.

The pseudonymous Sarah Cauldwell, a lawyer, arrives with a second appearance for her quintet of London barristers and history professor/sleuth Hilary Tamar in *The Shortest Way to Hades* (Scribners, $12.95). Intrigues here revolve about a five-million-pound trust, a complicated affair needing much legal attention and directing its riches to twenty-one-year-old Camilla Galloway. Surrounded by family members variously in need of money, logically Camilla should die. But instead it's cousin Dierdre, second in line, who falls off a roof. The scheming here is complex, and the prose is wonderfully, freshly ironic and witty.

The "Nameless Detective" stories of Bill Pronzini are such smoothly polished efforts that they are swift and concentrated pleasures to read. This is perhaps even more true than usual of the fifteenth volume in the series, *Bones* (St. Martin's, $12.95). A thirty-five-year-old suicide—not exactly the most attractive investigation for a private eye. But business is slow, and the death was that of a notable pulp detective-story writer, so Nameless is hooked. Why did the writer shoot himself? Curious how hazardous that question proves to be. And how is Nameless to deal with his partner's terminal infatuation with the pneumatic and witless Wanda?

The masterful police tales of Reginald Hill continue with *Exit Lines* (MacMillan, $13.95). A trio of elderly men die: one expires of cold, another is beaten in his bath, a third collides with a car while aboard his bicycle. This last is the most disturbing: the driver of the car may have been Superintendent Dalziel, unarguably stewed to the gills on his habitual tipple. Conflicts in loyalties thus arise for Inspector Pascoe, who besides the geriatric demises also has to deal with his absent wife's father, who's

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flirting about the edges of senility. Hill develops his theme expertly, weaving it around his characters with care and facility. Solid craftsmanship.

Martha G. Webb's second novel, *A White Male Running* (Walker, $13.95), is an engaging and persuasive tale of police investigation in a small Texas city. A black lawyer is running for political office, but a blackmailer remembers a forty-year-old murder and sends his messages. A young undercover cop, looking for drugs and struggling with betrayal of what once were his friends, stumbles across murder. And a psychotic, chuckling and humming over a lifetime enjoyment of killing, sharpens his knives. Impressive.

William L. DeAndrea brings back Clifford Driscoll, entrepreneurial American spy and the illegitimate son of a powerful U.S. congressman, in *Snark* (Mysterious Press, $15.95). Driscoll, here called Bellman, is again in pursuit of terrorist Leo Calvin, who has fled to England and there kidnaped the retired grand old man of British Intelligence, Sir Lewis Alfot. Calvin has three objectives: money, maneuvering back into the good graces of the Russians, and the death of Bellman. Meanwhile, a serial killer is disposing of his victims around England in eye-catching fashion. Bellman's style in all this is to stir things up, create confusion, and see what bubbles to the surface. He succeeds, and madness runs rampant. I haven't enjoyed a spy story as much as this in ages.

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"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

IAN STUART

"I don't like the way he looks at Auntie," Juliet told her boy friend Roger. "I believe he really hates her . . ."

NONE OF US IS PERFECT

by IAN STUART

William Gledhill couldn't have said afterward when the idea of killing Winifred first occurred to him. If he had looked back, and he was not a man to indulge in such pointless exercises, he would probably have decided that, like Topsy, the idea just growed, so that when it finally took shape it seemed almost inevitable.

He had never felt any affection for his half sister, and over the years he had come to actively dislike a good deal about her. Her muffled little snores for one thing, he thought, looking at her across the hearthrug, and the puffs she gave at the end of every breath when she was asleep. He found himself waiting for them, infuriated but unable to ignore them. He even hated the way she smiled at him with the vague, meaningless smile of the very old.

William was seventy-one, his half sister eight years older. Her mother had died of influenza when she was still a baby and her father, after waiting a decent three years, had married again. He was a chemist and his second wife had been his assistant. Quite why he married her only she perhaps really knew. He certainly didn't love her. But he was fond of her in a vague sort of way, and she was always there. Perhaps it was so clear she expected him to marry her he came to accept the idea himself.

It wasn't long before he regretted the marriage bitterly. His wife was a shrew. But he was too much of a gentleman to do anything about it—in those days and amongst his sort of people, one was

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expected to behave like a gentleman, if one was not a lady. He had made a commitment and he would honor it. Divorce was out of the question. Anyway, his wife would never have divorced him and it was impossible to imagine her being unfaithful. After William was born, she had made her distaste for "that sort of thing" very clear.

Thus the atmosphere in which the boy grew up was hardly a happy one. That may have helped form his character but almost certainly had nothing to do with his decision to murder Winifred. After all, he had reached his present age without murdering anyone before.

While his sister stayed at home caring devotedly for their aging parents, William became a civil servant. A cynic might have said he was ideally suited for the job, for he had developed a crabbed outlook which made it easier and more satisfying for him to say no than yes. It also ensured he was not promoted beyond his capacity.

In due course, he retired on a small pension and, since it offered the prospect of more comfort than he could have afforded anywhere else, he went to live with Winifred in the cottage she had bought with some of the money she had inherited from their father. Her stepmother had died some years before.

Old Mr. Gledhill wasn't a rich man, but when they were sold his business and the big old house in Carshalton had realized enough to ensure Winifred would never be hard up. He had left her two thirds of his estate and William a third. William wasn't shocked or surprised—his father had told him years before that as he had his salary and in years to come would have his pension, while Winifred had sacrificed her prospects of anything of the sort to look after her stepmother and him, it was only fair she should receive a larger share of anything he left.

William had agreed. He wasn't a mean or greedy man where money was concerned, and he hadn't disliked Winifred as much then as he came to do later. Even now he didn't begrudge her the money prudently invested in government stocks and building societies. Or, more accurately, he wouldn't have done if he hadn't needed money so badly himself. For, surprisingly, after he retired, William had developed a passion for betting on horses. He knew nothing about them, never went near a racecourse, and slipped into the betting shop on the other side of the town when he could count on nobody he knew seeing him. He didn't want Winifred learning about his weakness.

Almost inevitably he lost more than he won, and this morning he had received a mildly threatening letter from his bank. It was the

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first such letter he had ever had, and he was both alarmed and humiliated—the more so because he wasn't in a position to do anything about his overdraft.

William was a short spare man with thinning hair that was still sandy rather than grey and a small moustache. Perhaps his faded blue eyes were a shade too close together, but none of us is perfect. Seeing him walk along the street, spruce and upright, a stranger might have put him down as a retired Army officer—a captain, perhaps. He didn't play golf or bowls and spent a good deal of his time reading biographies and travel books or sitting in his chair brooding. Sometimes he did a little gardening. To people he met in the street or in shops he was polite in a slightly formal old-fashioned way they liked. There were a lot of elderly people in Camford-on-Sea.

He was also becoming forgetful. He had always been proud of his memory, and at first he refused to accept that it was failing him now. But in the end he had to admit the truth to himself.

It first became apparent one Sunday afternoon when Juliet had come 'round to see them. Juliet was Winifred's only other relative—her grandmother had been the first Mrs. Gledhill's only brother or sister to survive infancy. She was a departmental manageress in a big store in the town, a pleasant, businesslike young woman of twenty-eight. Privately, William considered her bossy. For years he and his sister had hardly seen her, but lately she had taken to coming over every two or three weeks. William considered Juliet a silly, pretentious name and he disapproved of her smart clothes and makeup, but he didn't mind her coming so long as it wasn't too often—he hated his routine being interrupted.

He and Juliet were Winifred's heirs and he resented the terms of his sister's will more bitterly than he had ever done his father's. She was leaving him a third of her estate and Juliet the same. The remaining third was to be held in trust for him during his lifetime and pass to Juliet when he died. He asked himself why she, a second or third cousin, should get anything. It was a poor reward for his company all these years, for enduring Winifred's endless chatter about nothing, and her snoring. Moreover, there was bad blood on Juliet's side of the family—one of her grandfathers had been a womanizer and a crook. True, he had never been arrested, but it was common knowledge he was a swindler.

Winifred had aged a good deal these last few months. She could no longer see well enough to read much, and her chief interest was

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in pottering about the garden. Not that she could do that for long at a time with her arthritis. Poor Winifred, William thought, she couldn't get much pleasure out of life. With a rare flash of imagination, it occurred to him she was like a very old dog, dragging herself about, and snuffling in her sleep. If she *were* a dog, they would put her out of her misery.

It was as if William had suddenly seen something which had been in front of him for a long time. That afternoon, he went to a busy garden center where he wasn't known and bought some weedkiller.

When he got home, Juliet was there. "Been shopping?" she inquired.

William nodded. He had a sudden dreadful notion that not only did Juliet know what was in the bag he was carrying but why he had bought it, too. He went out to the shed and hid it behind other bags containing less lethal compounds like bone meal and lawn sand.

Winifred was lying down in her bedroom, and when Juliet came into the living room she found him looking for something. "Have you lost something, Uncle?" she asked.

"You haven't seen my glasses anywhere, have you?"

"No. Can't you find them?"

If he could, he wouldn't be looking for them, William thought. "No," he said grumpily.

"Aren't they in their usual place?"

"I'd have found them if they were, wouldn't I?"

Juliet ignored his ill humor. "Have you looked in all your pockets?" she suggested.

William didn't bother to answer.

"Do you remember when you had them last?"

That was the most irritating thing. He remembered telling himself before he went out he wouldn't need them where he was going and putting them down somewhere. He could have sworn it was on the end of the mantelpiece where he always put them, but they weren't there now.

After two more suggestions had been received in silence or with a grunt, Juliet returned to the kitchen and left him to search alone. Eventually William found the glasses on the dressing-table in his bedroom. When he did, he remembered putting them there before changing his shoes to go out.

Having bought the weedkiller, William's nerve failed, and for the

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next week it remained in the shed untouched. Winifred caught a chill and didn't feel up to cooking or doing the housework, so Mrs. Hogg, their home help, got them a light lunch and Juliet came 'round on two evenings to cook a meal and do the washing-up. William, who had lived in lodgings most of his adult life and been spoiled by doting landladies, showed no inclination to help.

The second evening, Winifred stayed up later, and watching her across the fireplace while she dozed in her chair William felt his dislike return stronger than ever. Then he looked up and saw Juliet watching him, and again he had a feeling that she knew what was in his mind. It unnerved him.

"I don't like the way he looks at Auntie," she told her boy friend Roger the next day when they were having lunch together. "I believe he really hates her."

Roger, who was a solicitor, laughed. He had been to the cottage two or three times with Juliet and knew both the old people. "I expect he gets fed up being cooped up with her all the time," he said. "It can't be much of a life for him."

"She's a dear old thing," Juliet protested. "And he's a horrible old man."

"He hasn't tried his luck with you, has he?" Roger sounded amused. Juliet's apparent affection for her aunt surprised him—he'd always thought she regarded her as a nuisance.

"No, of course he hasn't. He isn't horrible in that way—at least as far as I know he isn't. But he doesn't care about anybody except himself—and he's always grumbling."

"He doesn't like me," Roger remarked.

"Of course he does." Juliet dismissed the observation impatiently. All the same, it was true, she thought. Uncle William considered Roger too quick and ambitious. He was the sort of old man who disliked and resented success in the young.

"Old people often get like him," Roger told her.

That day William mislaid his gloves and, although he looked everywhere in the house where they could conceivably be, he didn't find them.

In the evening he suggested to Winifred he heat some soup for them both as Juliet hadn't come 'round. Winifred accepted gratefully.

A few hours later, she was taken ill. At first she tried to bear the pain without disturbing William, but soon it became too bad. She

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was horribly sick and thought she was going to die. Frightened and in great pain, she tapped on the wall between their rooms.

William was awake. He had hardly slept since coming to bed three hours before. Moreover, the cottage walls were thin, and for the last twenty minutes he had been lying listening to Winifred moaning and retching. The sounds horrified and disgusted him, but in a queer way they seemed to have no connection with him and he felt no responsibility for what she was suffering. He waited for a minute or two, then he went in to her.

She was in a pitiable state. It was no part of William's plan for her to die just yet—she had no history of stomach disorders and her sudden death would inevitably lead to a post-mortem examination and an inquest. He had to establish a record of similar attacks, calling in the doctor so that he, elderly and overworked, would accept her death as almost expected and sign the certificate without a qualm. Now, seeing her lying there amidst the tumbled sheets, he was horribly afraid he had put too much of the weedkiller in her soup and she was going to die.

"Doctor!" Winifred gasped between two spasms. "Please call him."

"I will," William promised.

He hurried downstairs and rang the doctor's home.

Doctor Ellis arrived within a quarter of an hour, a kindly man nearing retirement. He examined Winifred and said he could find nothing wrong with her apart from the sickness, and there was a lot of it about just then. She would probably be much better in a few hours, but if she wasn't William should ring him and he would call again.

"I'm sorry to have got you out of bed, Doctor," William said as they went downstairs.

"That's all right. Better safe than sorry, and these things can be very distressing." The doctor followed William to the front door. "Still, Miss Gledhill's very fit for her age."

"I suppose she is," William agreed, his tone implying that he was by no means sure. "But she has attacks like this sometimes. Not as bad as this one, though."

The doctor nodded and said, "Goodnight."

There was no need to call him again that day. Nor the next. William's nerve had almost gone.

Not surprisingly, the poison left Winifred very weak. It was all she could do to stand up and put one foot in front of the other, and

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she spent most of the time in bed, coming downstairs only for a bowl of soup and some thin bread and butter in the middle of the day and returning to bed about five o'clock.

On the fourth day, having made a gesture by seeing her settled for the night, William took himself off for his customary evening stroll. It had been a blustery day, but with evening the wind had dropped and now it was quite warm, the sky still streaked with orange and gold. William hardly noticed it—the beauties of nature meant nothing to him, but he liked the feel of the mild air on his face and the dry turf springy under his feet. He decided to go a little farther than usual—as far as the last breakwater.

It was five hundred yards from the cottage, and when he reached it he turned and walked back, refreshed and his confidence restored. He knew now what he was going to do. Climbing the stairs, when he reached the landing he paused, listening, but there was no sound from Winifred's room.

"You're six minutes late," Roger said, looking at his watch. He grinned.

"Yes, I'm sorry," Juliet apologized, slightly out of breath. "I told you I wasn't sure how long I'd be this evening. Have you been waiting long?"

"Not very. I got here at ten to."

Usually it was Juliet who was punctual and Roger who was late. She was well organized and he was one of those people who seem incapable of being on time for anything. Whatever good resolutions he made, however early he started getting ready, invariably something delayed him. It irritated Juliet and she had told him once that it was because he didn't care about other people's convenience. He had laughed. But this evening he had taken extra care, and for once he had been on time for their meeting.

"It's a change, anyway," Juliet said crisply.

"You're learning my worst faults now instead of when it's too late. You should be glad," he told her.

"Should I?"

Juliet tucked her arm in his and they started walking toward the corner at the end of the street. Roger had been hinting at marriage again, she thought. They had been more or less engaged for several months, but did she really want to marry him? Did she want to marry anybody, for that matter?

"All right?" he inquired.

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"Fine." But she wasn't—she was on edge. Perhaps she would feel better when she'd had a drink.

The next morning, William dressed, went downstairs, and got himself his usual breakfast of toast and marmalade. He had just finished it when Mrs. Hogg arrived.

"Miss Gledhill not up yet?" she asked briskly. She was a little sparrow of a woman with a wiry figure, dark wiry hair, and glasses.

"No," William answered curtly. He didn't like Mrs. Hogg, whose cleaning disturbed his peace. He tried to be out of the house while she did her work, but this morning it was raining and he had no intention of getting wet on her account.

"Poor dear," she said sympathetically. "These stomachs do take it out of you something awful. My sister Dora—"

"Miss Gledhill's much better," William said firmly.

Mrs. Hogg looked skeptical. How could a mere man, and not even a husband, know how a lady felt? "I'll just go up and see if there's anything she'd like," she said.

"I shouldn't." William felt some explanation was called for and added, "She may be asleep."

"I won't disturb her if she is," Mrs. Hogg assured him.

He watched her start up the stairs and turned a page of his paper. He was folding it when Mrs. Hogg screamed. The dreadful sound, touched with hysteria, went on and on, turning William's stomach to water. With a mighty effort he pulled himself together. "What is it, Mrs. Hogg?" he called, hurrying up the stairs.

The screaming stopped as suddenly as it had started. He saw the door of Winifred's room was open, crossed the little landing, and walked in.

Winifred was lying on her back in the bed. Her eyes stared blindly at the ceiling. The bedclothes had been pulled away from the top of her body. On the left breast of her modest old-fashioned nightdress there was a small red stain and from the center of it protruded the handle of a carving knife.

"She's been murdered," Mrs. Hogg breathed, her tone blending horror and incredulity.

She was liable to become hysterical again at any moment, William thought. He himself felt surprisingly calm. Then she turned and stared at him, and the look in her eyes alarmed him.

"We'd better go downstairs," he said. "I'll call the police."

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Mrs. Hogg obeyed, and after a few seconds he followed her.

It seemed to William the police would never leave. Already they had been at the cottage on and off for nearly forty-eight hours. And they kept questioning him.

He hadn't dreamed that in their eyes he might be a suspect. He had been so careful after that night when he was afraid, terribly afraid she would die and they would believe he had poisoned her.

"You needed money badly, didn't you?" the superintendent in charge of the inquiries asked him. The superintendent's name was Griffiths and his Welsh accent grated on William's nerves. His tone now wasn't aggressive or accusatory—rather it seemed quite understanding, as if everybody needed money and might be expected to take drastic steps to obtain it.

"Not badly," William replied.

"No? We've found the letter from your bank, Mr. Gledhill. You've lost a lot on the horses, haven't you?"

So it went on, quietly and relentlessly, until in the end William couldn't stand it any longer and he burst out, "I didn't kill her. I didn't! I was going to but—" He stopped then, shocked and terrified by his admission.

"Yes?" Griffiths asked gently.

William only shook his head and muttered, "Nothing." But it was too late, the damage was done.

His counsel could do little at his trial—the evidence against him was overwhelming. He had bought the weedkiller and within a few days Winifred had been taken suddenly and violently ill with symptoms which, as Doctor Ellis reluctantly conceded, and other experts confirmed, were identical with those she would have exhibited if she had consumed a small quantity of it. The police had found the bag, still almost full, half hidden in the shed. The fact that William seemed to have made a half hearted attempt to conceal it appeared to strengthen the case against him. It suggested guilt when weedkiller was a perfectly normal thing for a gardener to have.

At the post mortem, minute traces of the poison were discovered in the dead woman's organs. Prosecuting counsel made a lot of that. He admitted he didn't know why William had changed his mind and stabbed Winifred. Perhaps he had been appalled by her suffering when the poison took effect, perhaps he had decided it was too uncertain and too risky. The reasons, counsel submitted, were im-

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material—what was clear was that William had stabbed his half sister because he was in desperate need of money and he would inherit a third of her estate outright and the income on another third.

Death had occurred between nine o'clock in the evening and midnight. It was useless William's protesting that the crime must have been committed while he was out for his evening walk or while he was asleep and that he had mislaid the carving knife several days before. There were no signs of a forced entry and nobody could imagine a burglar who had come unarmed, and who took nothing, hunting around for a knife in order to murder a helpless old woman.

"You said you didn't like the way he looked at her," Roger reminded Juliet after William had been led away to start his life sentence.

"Yes."

All Auntie's money would be hers now, Juliet thought. A convicted murderer couldn't benefit from his crime, so everything Auntie Winifred had left would come to her. Over 50,000 pounds plus whatever she got for the cottage, the lawyer had said. He was Roger's senior partner, an elderly, rather stuffy little man.

"Why did he wipe the handle of the knife?" she asked. "After all, he'd used it nearly every day. The police would expect to find his fingerprints on it."

"To make them think somebody else had stabbed her," Roger replied, amused by her simplicity. "They would have had to wipe it—or wear gloves and smudge the prints already on it."

"Uh!" Juliet shuddered.

So Roger had seen that, she thought, turning her mind to more pleasant things. She wouldn't want to live in the cottage. When everything was settled, she would be able to buy a new car and lots of clothes and treat herself to a holiday somewhere exotic and glamorous, like Sardinia or the Seychelles. There was only one cloud on the horizon . . .

Really, Roger thought, it had all gone very well. Almost unbelievably well. It had been clever of him to move things in the cottage from their usual places until William was persuaded his memory was failing him. His proud, petty character insured he would say nothing when he couldn't find the carving knife—and who would believe it had been stolen? A subtle touch, that. And surprisingly

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easy. He had just told his secretary he was going to see a client, driven to the cottage, and let himself in using the key he'd had copied from Juliet's. She had given him the idea when she told him about the time William couldn't find his glasses.

One day when he went to pick her up at the cottage, she wasn't ready when he arrived. While he waited for her, he looked into the shed and, seeing the packet of weedkiller half hidden in a corner, he remembered her remark about the way William looked at his sister. He hadn't really expected William to poison the old girl, but when she was suddenly taken ill with stomach pains and sickness he wondered. And it was then his plan was born.

He had had to wait until William was out of the way before letting himself into the cottage that night, and William had been later than usual going for his walk. It had seemed an age to Roger, waiting just along the road in his car before at last he appeared and set off along the cliff-top. By the time he returned, it was all over, and Roger was on his way to meet Juliet.

It had been a stroke of luck, her having to work late stock-taking that evening so that he was at their meeting place before her—another that William had gone to bed without glancing into Winifred's room. That made it harder for the police to pinpoint the time of the murder, while to the jury it seemed to be another indication of guilt.

Yes, Roger decided complacently, everything had worked out very well. And William had nobody to blame but himself for his predicament—if he hadn't tried to kill Winifred, he would probably have been acquitted. Which might have been awkward. As it was, he, Roger, was going to marry a girl with a very tidy little nest-egg—and if he hadn't got control of it within six months he didn't deserve his luck.

"Roger?" Juliet said uncertainly.

"Yes, darling?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know how to tell you this. I've been thinking about it a lot lately, and I've decided I can't marry you."

Roger stared at her. His world seemed to be falling apart. "You must," he nearly shouted. "You've got to."

"Why must I?" Juliet forced herself to meet his eye. She had expected him to be upset and hurt, but he was glaring at her as if he really hated her. It reminded her of the expression she had seen in Uncle William's eyes when he looked at Auntie.

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One of the six cells in Nat Kalmus's jail was made of the best steel and reserved for important criminals—killers and robbers and such . . .

THE MOANING AT THE BAR

by ROBERT P. MILLS

Sheriff Nat Kalmus felt a sense of quiet pride as he looked down the line of cells. He had supervised their building some twelve years ago and knew he'd done a good job. Not only a good job, a smart job—saved money for the town and still provided all the security needed. The steel in the cells down the line from where he stood was cheaper and less impregnable than the steel in the cell at this end, because after all who needed the best steel to hold the drunks and speeders and vagrants who were put in those cells? The cell at this end was reserved for important criminals—killers and robbers and such—and it was the only one of the six they'd ever needed. They didn't have much violent crime in this small town.

He looked out into the office where his deputy, Rafe Saunders, warts and all, was sitting at the desk with his boots up on its shiny surface. How many times had he told the klutz not to do that? There were fancy people in this town, a lot of money around, and it just didn't look right. But Rafe could never remember, and Nat had finally given up trying. Rafe would never change, even though Nat had told him and told him he'd never make it to sheriff if he didn't learn how to improve himself.

This afternoon, for example, when Mrs. Richmond called. It was a good thing he'd been there to take the call because Rafe wouldn't have had a clue how to handle it.

Mrs. Richmond had said that her husband's office had called from the city and wanted him to call back as soon as possible—it was a most important matter. And Alfred had gone off to buy some stakes, he'd said, which he wanted to get before dinner. He'd been building something in the garage, Mrs. Richmond didn't know what, and she guessed he was eager to finish it. She'd called Jim down at Duke's

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Hardware, a store that carried lumber, too, and the place Alfred usually got such stuff, but Jim said Alfred hadn't been there—could the sheriff help find him?

He'd told her he had an idea and he'd get right on it. Sheriff Kalmus knew his town and the people in it pretty well, and he knew something about Alfred Richmond. He also knew something about Rita, the sexpot at the supermarket checkout. She got off work, the sheriff knew, at four o'clock, and he knew Alfred Richmond knew that, too, because he'd seen him pick her up in his yellow Mercedes more than once about that time. And the sheriff figured that Mr. Richmond had probably said he was going to get some steaks, not stakes, to explain, if asked, what he was doing at the supermarket.

The logical place to look, Nat thought, was the Bridge Motel out on the highway, where the parking lot was around back, safely out of sight of the road.

As he drove over to the motel, he thought about how lucky he was. As sexy as Rita might be, he had his Nancy, who was still plenty sexy for him. She kept coming up with new ideas—like those dynamite satin sheets, for instance. And that fancy golf cap she put on to let him know when she was in the mood. (He'd gotten it from a grateful rich guy he'd let off a speeding charge once.) Yes, *he* sure didn't need any Ritas.

When he swung around in back of the Bridge Motel, he saw, as he'd expected he would, Alfred Richmond's yellow Mercedes, parked by Number Twelve. He pulled in alongside it—and noticed on the other side of his own car the quiet red Porsche that belonged to Bob Millerton, the town's busiest womanizer. He wondered what Bob's secret with women was and who he had with him today. Probably a bored housewife.

Nat got out of the car and rapped on the door of Number Twelve. He said, "Mr. Richmond, this is Sheriff Kalmus—I've got a message for you."

After some brief scurrying sounds, the door opened about four inches and Mr. Richmond's head appeared. "What is it, Sheriff?" he asked.

"Your wife called me to say your office was trying to reach you about something important. She tried you at Duke's because she thought you'd gone there to buy some building stakes, but Jim said he hadn't seen you. I said I'd try to find you, but didn't tell her where I'd look."

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Mr. Richmond looked relieved. "I thank you for that, sheriff. I guess you found me at the supermarket, right?"

"That's exactly where I found you," Nat said.

As he'd gone back to his car, he'd glanced into Bob Millerton's Porsche and saw something on the front seat that caused his eyes to narrow the way they did whenever he scented a serious crime in progress. His hand went to his holster as he turned toward the door of Number Thirteen.

And now, he thought, as he looked at Rafe Saunders' boots scuffing the top of the shiny desk, Rafe was acting sheriff and he was looking at the good steel in the important cell from the inside. Why in *hell* had Nancy left her cap on the seat of Bob Millerton's car? Nat rested his feverish forehead against the cold steel bar and moaned.

DETECTIVERSE

FRENCH CONNECTION

by DOROTHY PEER PROMISCUO

There was a young man named Dan,
Who heisted a bank and then ran
Right into the arms
Of two waiting gendarmes
Who heisted him right to the can.

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a *NEW* Frank Lewis story by

HUGH PENTECOST

The first story in Hugh Pentecost's new series about Frank Lewis, business agent for star athletes, was "Accessory After the Facts" in the May 1985 issue. In this second story in the series, Lewis goes after the killer of his promising young client, Alex McBride, quarterback for the Hawks, during a Football League championship game.

"Mr. Nice Guy," said Lieutenant Hardy. "That just helps to make it a little harder. Ask yourself, Mr. Lewis, why anyone would choose such a public and risky place to commit a murder? There must be hundreds of easier ways to knock a man off and stay safe . . ."

EIGHT-POINT SPREAD

by HUGH PENTECOST

There were seventy thousand witnesses to a murder that afternoon. Eyewitnesses, that is, at the scene, plus several hundred thousand viewers who saw it on television. It happened right there in front of the crowd in the stadium, and for the cameras for the TV fans to see, and yet at the time almost no one knew what they had seen. The man who pulled the trigger knew, of course, and probably others who helped set it up. I was there. I saw it. And at the time I just felt sorry that Alex McBride had been hurt in what had to be one of the very last plays of the game.

It was the game for the championship of the Football League. The Indians were the defending champions, a veteran team, beautifully coached and prepared. The Hawks were a young team, surprise contenders for the title. They had given the Indians something to

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think about all afternoon. Alex McBride, their young quarterback, had played a magnificent game, passing brilliantly, keeping the Hawks' offense up and fighting.

In the first half he had led his team to three scores, a touchdown and two field goals. At the half the Hawks were only trailing by a point, 14–13. But in the second half the Indians had taken command, scoring a touchdown and a field goal to go ahead 24–13. The defense tightened and held the Hawks scoreless until time began to run out on them.

Then, with less than two minutes to go, Alex McBride got hot again, passing to Joe Collingwood, his wide receiver, and Ed Pollack, his tight end. They worked the ball down to the Indians' twenty-yard line with only nineteen seconds left to play. There was no way they could win. If McBride could throw a touchdown pass to one of his backs or ends, they would still be four points short of winning. After that, they would have to kick off to the Indians and all the champions would have to do was sit on the ball and let the time run out. But a 24-to-20 game would be a great boost for the upstart Hawks.

Fans in the big crowd were beginning to drift out toward the parking lots and subway stations when Alex McBride took the snap from center and turned to go back in the pocket to throw his last pass. The turf was soft. It had rained steadily the night before and the temperature had risen. Even covered by a tarpaulin overnight, the grass surface was treacherous. McBride, darting back, apparently slipped and fell flat on his face. The ball dribbled away from him and was recovered by the Indians. All the champions had to do was wait for the clock to run out.

McBride didn't get up. Disappointment at failing on his last chance, I thought. The trainers and help came from the sidelines.

They seemed unduly excited after they'd examined Alex, I thought—the worst it could be was a muscle pull. None of the blitzing defense men had touched him. He'd just slipped and fallen. They brought a stretcher out and carried him off the field. Neither I nor anyone else in the huge crowd or the television viewers had any idea at that point that McBride had been shot through the back of his head by a high-powered rifle and was very, very dead. No one, that is, except the man who had pulled the trigger and the horrified Hawks trainers who had gone out on the field to help him.

The Indians had won the game 24–13, a figure you should keep in mind if you're interested in the rest of the story . . .

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If you've ever tried to work your way out of one of the country's big stadiums after an important sporting event, you'll know that you can't hurry. Thousands of people are trying to get to narrow exit areas all at the same time. Trying to make it quickly is a waste of effort.

I was headed for the Hawks' dressing room to compliment Alex McBride on the great game he'd played, and to commiserate with him on his last-play injury. The Hawks shouldn't be feeling too bad. They'd put up a much better fight than most of the experts had expected.

Fans, under normal conditions, would be besieging the winners' dressing room, but very much to my surprise the area outside the Hawks' quarters was jammed with reporters, cameramen, and even some of the Indians' players, who should have been celebrating in their own dressing room. Bill Taggert, who writes sports for the *Times* and is an old friend of mine, grabbed me as I tried to work my way to the Hawks' dressing-room door. I was surprised to see police, not just stadium guards, blocking the door.

"You heard anything, Frank?" Bill Taggert asked me.

"Like what?" I said.

"The word is that your client is dead," Bill said.

"Alex McBride? You're crazy, man."

"Shot through the back of the head."

I got muscular about then and wedged my way toward the dressing-room door, where two cops stopped me.

"Off limits, mister," I was told.

"I'm Frank Lewis," I told them, "Alex McBride's business agent."

The cop turned to his partner.

"Tell the lieutenant," he said.

It's hard to recall now how total my disbelief was at that moment. "What's this garbage about a shooting?" I remember asking.

"I don't know much more than you do, Mr. Lewis," the cop said. "We've only just been here a couple of minutes. All I know is it's a homicide."

"Alex McBride?"

"That's what they say. Lieutenant Hardy of Homicide happened to be here at the game, off duty, and—"

"I was here," I said. "What did he see that I didn't see?"

"He was watching the game from the Hawks' coaching booth. You know, coaches up there relaying information to the head coach and others on the sidelines. When they took McBride off the field, some-

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one relayed the information to the booth that he'd been shot. Lieutenant Hardy, being there, got things moving a little faster than they would have otherwise."

"But how did it happen? Who—?"

"You've got me, Mr. Lewis. But I think the lieutenant would like to talk to anyone who was connected to McBride. You say you're his agent?"

The other policeman reappeared. "Lieutenant Hardy wants you in, Mr. Lewis. But it may be a few minutes before he can talk to you." He looked a little green around the gills.

"Hole in his head big enough to drive a truck through," I heard him tell his partner as I went through the door.

I was familiar with the dressing room, having been there often. But the atmosphere was very different from the usual post-game climate. Most of the players hadn't started to change out of their uniforms or headed for the showers. There were no loud voices. Some ambulance attendants, a couple of uniformed cops, several strangers in civilian clothes, Ben Nolan, the team doctor, and Jack Garrity, the head coach, were gathered around a rubbing table in a far corner. I couldn't see it, but I knew Alex McBride's body must be on that table.

Someone grabbed hold of me and I saw it was Joe Collingwood, the wide receiver who was one of McBride's favorite receivers. The boy's face was dead white, unashamed tears streaming down his face. He put his arms around me, mud-stained jersey and all, the sweat on his cheeks as cold as though it had frozen there.

I knew him through McBride. They'd gone to college together, roomed together and played on the same college team, and moved on to the same pro-football organization after that. They couldn't have been closer. I let him fight to get his control back, keeping a comforting arm around him.

"Some maniac!" he said finally. "The shot was fired from a distance with a high-powered rifle. It could have been from the stands, or from the roof of one of the apartment buildings outside the stadium. People watch from there, you know? He could have got anyone. It happened to be Alex. It could have been me—anyone!"

"Why?" I asked.

"Some kind of a crazy, just taking a potshot," Collingwood said. "Alex didn't have any enemies!"

"Has Julie been notified?" I asked.

"She would have been watching on television."

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Then she would know, I thought. The networks must be shouting the story all over the country by now. Poor Julie. She was a nice Midwestern girl, full of fun, very much in love. My father would have called her relationship with Alex McBride "living in sin," but today nobody thinks anything of unmarried couples living together. The census bureau calls them POSSLQs—people of opposite sex sharing living quarters. Alex and Julie had been lovers in college, she waiting on table to pay her way, he operating on an athletic scholarship. Then suddenly Alex was a millionaire at twenty-five—a five-year contract with the Hawks at just under a million a year. He and Julie could afford to get married, with a couple of yachts thrown in. But "We don't want to change anything," Julie had told me. "It could make things different."

One of the civilians at the rubbing table turned away, spoke to one of the cops, glanced at me, and came my way. Lieutenant Walter Hardy, Homicide, was a big blond man who looked like a football player himself—broad shoulders, hands like hams.

"Mr. Lewis?" he asked me, and identified himself. "You were here at the game?"

I told him I had been.

"Like almost everyone else, you didn't know what had happened, right?"

"And still don't," I said.

"A high-powered rifle, probably with a telescopic site," Hardy said. "Could have been used for shooting elephants in Africa."

"Just took a wild shot and Alex got unlucky?"

"Could be. And could be he was the intended target," Hardy said. "You knew him well, I understand."

"His business agent," I said. "I negotiated a five-year, five-million-dollar contract for him with the Hawks. I arranged endorsements and commercials for him."

"And got paid a commission on what you got for him?"

"Yes."

Hardy gave me a tight little smile. "Pretty good alibi for you," he said. "Shooting McBride would cost you a small fortune of your own."

"How does a man fire a rifle with a telescopic site with thousands of people all around him and not be seen?" I asked.

Hardy shrugged. "It could have been from one of the rooftops outside the stadium."

"People who live in those buildings sell those rooftop seats," I said. "Not just anyone wanders up there."

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"With a big crowd like this there are always people with gadgets to help them see better," Hardy said. "You see them at parades with things like periscopes to look over people's heads. Guy out in the bleachers wouldn't necessarily be noticed if he had some kind of telescope-looking thing. A camera nut with some kind of special equipment, they might think. But it's still early. People here in the stadium still don't know what they saw. When they get home, hear their radios, watch their TV, someone may remember something —some guy with some gadget."

"But why?" I asked.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Hardy said. "Did McBride have enemies, someone with a grudge, somebody whose woman he was fooling around with?"

"He was well liked," I said. "He had a love life of his own."

"Mr. Nice Guy," Hardy said. "That just helps to make it a little harder. Ask yourself, Mr. Lewis, why anyone would choose such a public and risky place to commit a murder? There must be hundreds of easier ways to knock a man off and stay safe."

"Beats me," I said.

"The killer wanted all McBride's fans to see him get it? That way we *are* dealing with a psycho."

"Everybody who commits a murder is a psycho," I said.

"Unless maybe he raped your sister or killed your mother. Explainable rage and the need to see punishment done."

"In front of a million people?"

Hardy's eyes remained alert on mine. "So a personal motive doesn't come to your mind. The game? It couldn't affect the outcome. Even if McBride had thrown a touchdown pass on that last play, the Indians would still have won, twenty-four to twenty."

For the first time I found myself thinking without emotion. "The spread," I said.

"Spread?"

"The point spread," I said. "Thousands of people who bet on the Indians had to give the Hawks eight points. Twenty-four to thirteen and they win, even giving eight points. Twenty-four to twenty, giving eight points, and they lose, even though the Indians would actually have won the game."

"Why would I give eight points?" Hardy asked.

"The official spread. It's printed on the sports pages of all the papers. Bookmakers go with it—they have to. If the Hawks had scored on that last play it could have made a difference of millions

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of dollars one way or another. Big bookies who covered bets on the Hawks, giving eight points, could have been taken to the cleaners."

"They would lose even though they were betting on the team that won?"

"Because the spread was eight points." I nodded. "It's like a handicap of eight points. If the Hawks scored on that last play, they would have won for the people who bet on them even though they lost twenty-four to twenty."

"So someone might have killed a man to prevent it?"

"For a million bucks—if it's your money? I know it sounds crazy—"

"It could have happened on any preceding play," Hardy said. "A long pass—pass catcher running fifty or sixty yards."

"They would have had time to nail him on the way," I said. "This last play, from in close, would have been a bang-bang play. All or nothing in a couple of seconds. They had to stop Alex before he got rid of the ball. They could have got him in the leg or the shoulder—but they got him in the head and killed him."

"Here endeth the first lesson," Hardy said. "Thanks for clearing away some of the fog, Mr. Lewis."

I was reminded of an old Walt Disney cartoon in which the greedy, villainous fox suddenly had dollar signs instead of the pupils in his eyes, realizing that professional as well as amateur bettors who had covered the Hawks and been given eight points would soon be out celebrating even though a man may well have been killed to make certain of the winning. Then there were the losers, who would be screaming foul. And there would be me, seeing several hundred thousand in commissions over the next five years go down the drain.

There were going to be a handful of problems, contracts that couldn't be fulfilled. There was an insurance policy with Lloyds of London which would recompense the Hawks management to a small extent, and me to a small extent. I'm not a total money jerk, however. Alex McBride hadn't only been a profitable client—I had thought of him as a friend. The shocking end to his budding career was not only going to cost me the friendship and confidence of a young man I'd come to think of almost as a son. Somewhere out in the Midwest Alex had parents. And there was Julie. They needed sympathy and help and someone they could turn to with answers to questions that needed answering. My personal lawyer had drawn a will for Alex that I knew would help his folks and the girl—if that would matter to them in this dark moment—and there was an insurance policy.

I explained some of this to Hardy. "I'm not a detective," I told him.

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"That part is your job. I need to do what I can for Alex's people. So if it's all right with you—"

"Let me know where I can reach you," Hardy said.

I gave him a business card and scribbled my home phone on it. "I'm going to try to find Julie Fisk, Alex's girl," I said.

"I'll probably need to talk to her, too."

So I gave him Julie's address and phone number and took off. It wasn't easy to get away. The area outside the dressing room was jammed worse than before with reporters and cameramen waiting for a statement from the police. They clawed at me for information. I didn't have much to give them that they didn't already have. I gave them my theory about the betting spread as a motive and managed to get away.

It was fifteen minutes later and three blocks away from the stadium when I found an unoccupied pay phone. I dialed Alex's apartment. Julie would be there, should be there, and needing someone to lean on. The phone was busy, and stayed busy endlessly. In the end I gave up, flagged a taxi, and headed downtown to their apartment building.

When I got there, the lobby was crowded and the doorman and elevator men were almost literally fighting off fans, friends, and newshounds who were trying to see Julie or get information they hadn't gotten on TV or radio.

I finally got on one of the elevators. The boy running the car was bright-eyed with excitement.

"It's really true, Mr. Lewis?"

"Too damn true," I said. "Have you seen Miss Fisk?"

He shook his head. "I came on at noon," he said. "I haven't seen her since I came on. She usually stays in and watches the Sunday games on TV. But I suppose the championship, she'd be at the game."

"I think she's in," I said. "The phone's been busy."

At Alex's floor, I went to the door of his apartment and stood with my finger on the bell. There's a peephole in the door and eventually it slid open.

"It's Frank, Julie."

"Oh, thank God!"

I heard the sound of the chain lock being removed and then the door opened and she was in my arms, sobbing. I managed to get in and close the door behind me and then stood there, holding her.

"I can't believe it," she finally managed to say.

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"Your phone was busy."

"I took it off the hook. People kept calling. I can't talk."

"You were watching on television?"

She nodded. "I saw him fall and—and fumble the ball. When he just lay there, I thought it was just his disappointment at missing that last chance. Then, somehow, I don't know how, I knew it was much worse than that. He'd told me there was danger—but I didn't dream he meant that kind of danger."

"He *told* you there was danger?"

"Let's go inside," she said. She led the way into the living room, wiping her eyes.

It was a man's room, pictures of teams and players, a trophy case with, among other things, the football he'd been awarded as "player of the game" in the Cotton Bowl a couple of years ago. The room now represented his tragically terminated career.

"What do you mean, he told you there was danger?" I asked Julie.

She sat on the couch, rocking back and forth.

"We're trying to find his killer, Julie. Whatever Alex told you—"

"It was the night before last," she said. "I was getting dinner in the kitchen when the front doorbell rang. Alex called out that he'd get it, and then I heard him say, 'What the hell are you doing here, Bunny?' I didn't know any 'Bunny' and I thought I knew all Alex's friends. Alex came out into the kitchen and I knew from the look on his face that he was angry. 'This guy is a creep from one of the big bookmakers,' he said. 'Stay out of sight until I get rid of him.'

"I went on preparing dinner and after maybe twenty minutes Alex rejoined me. 'Can you imagine the nerve of that bastard?' he said. 'He offered me twenty-five grand to make sure the Hawks don't beat the spread in the championship game. I told him to drop dead.' "

Julie stopped and sniffed mightily.

"That was it?" I asked, giving her my handkerchief.

She used it, then continued: " 'You should report that to Coach Garrity or the League office, shouldn't you?' I asked him. He gave me a bitter laugh. 'I wish I could,' he said. I didn't understand why he couldn't and I said so. He just paced around the kitchen, not saying anything for a while, as if he was trying to make up his mind about something. Finally he sat me down and let me have it. 'During the training period, when we were separated,' he said, 'remember? Well, I did a fool thing. I was persuaded to try some drugs. God help me, Julie, I was hooked there for a while. I was buying the stuff on the street, bringing it into the camp, and circulating it to some of

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the other guys. If that got back to the coach, he'd have gone to the League president and I'd have automatically been suspended for a year. My career would have been over before it started.'

"I couldn't believe what he was telling me, Frank. I'd never seen any sign of drugs. Alex told me that Bud Greer, one of the veterans on the team, found out what was going on at the training camp. 'Bud was the medicine I needed,' he said. 'Bud made me see where it would take me if I went on with it. He'd been hooked himself when he was a rookie. He knew a shrink who could help me—had helped him. He laid it on the line to me—if I didn't get help, he'd report what he knew to the coach and the front office.'

"Alex went to this psychiatrist," Julie said after stopping to take a big breath. "He wasn't so far gone that he couldn't be helped. And so that was that. He hadn't told me because it wasn't a problem any more and he didn't want to upset me. Now it had come back to haunt him."

"This Bunny knew about it?" I asked.

She nodded. "Alex figured these big-time gamblers must keep a record on key players—things they can use against them if they want a game fixed."

"So Alex had to play it their way or they'd spill what they knew about him."

"That was the way this character left it with him," Julie said.

"And he agreed?"

"No! *You* saw how he played the game, Frank! He told me he was going to give it everything he had and make these crooks pay through the nose. Then he'd go to the coach and the owners and tell them."

"But he didn't make them pay through the nose," I said sadly.

"He might have if he'd connected on that last play! They obviously couldn't risk it. They saw he wasn't playing it their way." She was crying again.

"Would you know Bunny if you saw him again?" I asked her.

"No. I never did see him, Frank. I was in the kitchen the whole time he was here."

"If you heard him speak, would you recognize his voice?"

"I didn't hear him speak. All I heard was Alex saying 'What the hell are you doing here, Bunny?' "

"Could you have been mistaken about what you heard? Could the name you heard have been Bunkie and not Bunny?"

"I don't know, Frank. Alex was across the living room at the front

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door." She gestured. "I thought I heard 'Bunny.' I suppose it could have been 'Bunkie.' But—"

"Bunkie Kyle is a legman for Arnold Rothman. You've heard of Rothman?"

"Wasn't he connected with some casino scandal in Atlantic City?"

"That's the man," I said, "and Bunkie Kyle is his boy. Rothman could have been covering a million dollars' worth of bets on the game."

"Then why didn't they just tell what they knew about Alex and keep him out of the game?"

"If Alex had been suspended before the game, all bets would have been off," I said. "They had to let him play and win with him in there if they could. —May I use your phone?"

I should have had my head examined, then and there. I should have gone straight back to the stadium, located Lieutenant Hardy, and told him what I'd learned. Instead I tried to reach him on the phone. There wasn't a single line to the stadium open and so I decided to be a hero.

I told Julie to stay put and not to tell anyone what she'd told me except Lieutenant Hardy if he showed up—I had given him this address and phone number. "If he does reach you, tell him everything."

"Where are you going?" she said.

"I'm going to find Bunkie Kyle."

Arnold Rothman and his boys weren't going to be too hard to find. Among other business enterprises, Rothman operated a restaurant and nightclub called The Seven-Eleven. Rothman and his goons would be there celebrating the win.

It was like Mardi Gras night at The Seven-Eleven. The place was jammed with guys and dolls, all very high, all celebrating just as I'd expected. I elbowed my way in, headed for the bar, and ordered myself a bourbon on the rocks. Then I saw a tall redheaded guy smooching with a chick at a corner table. Bunkie Kyle was as familiar to me as a movie star, although we didn't know each other.

I swallowed my drink and went over to him. He saw me coming and obviously knew who I was.

"You're Frank Lewis, aren't you?" he said as I stopped at his table. "Bad day for you, fella. Sorry."

"Can we talk for a minute?" I asked him.

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"If it's private it can't be here," he said. He reached out and touched the girl's shoulder. "I'll be back, babe."

He led the way through the noisy main rooms, down a few yards of a back corridor, and into someone's small private office, then turned and faced me. "What can I do for you, Lewis?" he asked.

I should have invented something, anything but the truth, but I was ready to buck the world to get even for Alex McBride.

"Tell me where you had your gunman located," I said. "Was it in the bleachers or was it on the roof of one of the surrounding buildings?"

"You're off your rocker, Lewis," Kyle said flatly and reached over and locked the door beside us. His other hand moved quickly and when I looked down he was pointing a handgun that looked like a cannon straight at my chest.

"There's someone who's going to want to talk to you," he said, backing and picking up the phone on the desk. "Molly? Tell Arnold he's needed in his office. Situation A. That's my girl." He put down the receiver and smiled at me. "What are you, some kind of boy scout? You got a slingshot there, you better drop it—unless you want me to blow a big hole between your baby-blue eyes."

I held out my hands, palms up. "No slingshot."

"You're a bigger fool than I thought you were," Kyle said.

There was a clicking sound and I turned. The door opened and a mean-looking thug walked in, also pointing a gun at me. Behind him, wearing a dinner jacket, was Arnold Rothman, handsome in a kind of movie-villain way.

"You're Frank Lewis," he said.

Kyle nodded, keeping his eyes on me. "Making a wild guess, boss."

"You were sure McBride wasn't going to talk," Rothman said, obviously not pleased with Kyle.

Kyle shook his head, trying to signal Rothman with his eyes not to say too much.

Rothman turned to me. "You came here alone to play some kind of bluff?"

"You know I'm not that dumb," I said, "I've got friends out there."

Rothman laughed. "So where are they?" He turned to the thug. "Take him out the back way and dump him."

"The police will know exactly who to look for if I turn up missing," I said.

Kyle jabbed his gun in my ribs. "Get moving."

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Rothman reached for the knob, the door opened, and I damn near passed out. Standing in the doorway was Lieutenant Hardy.

"Going somewhere, Lewis?" he asked.

For one awful moment I thought the big blond lieutenant was in on it, a partner in crime. And then a gun exploded almost in my face and I heard a scream behind me. What I hadn't seen was that Kyle had taken his gun out of my ribs and swung it toward Hardy, and a plainclothes cop behind Hardy had fired a shot into Kyle's shoulder.

"The party's over, Rothman," Hardy said.

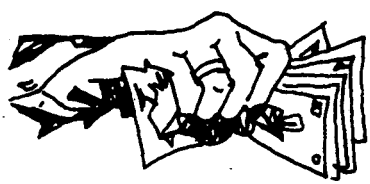
The place was cleared in twenty minutes.

"A million and a half bucks at stake," Hardy said. "I talked with Julie Fisk. They thought McBride would hold back to save his career, but they couldn't risk all that dough on the chance that he wouldn't. I owe you, Lewis."

"For what?"

"For telling me about the point spread," he said. "Without that we'd be noplace. It was the obvious lead to follow. As soon as we looked into the big bettors we knew where to come." He slapped me on the shoulder. "You look as if you could use a drink. There's no one out at the bar. I don't see how Rothman can object if you pour one for yourself on him."

Object or not, that's what I did.



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a *NEW* Uncle Abner story by

JOHN F. SUTER

In the first Uncle Abner story by Melville Davisson Post, "The Doomdorf Mystery" (1918), the Virginia squire says, "It is a world filled with the mysterious justice of God." How fortunate we are that John F. Suter received permission from the Post estate to continue this remarkable series, in which he has unerringly captured its creator's unique and appealing Jeffersonian tone and setting . . .

THE MARKED MAN

by JOHN F. SUTER

When I was age nine, Roy's Tavern had been a place of terror for me. A murderer had sought my life for the drovers' money that my father had entrusted to me to deliver. That wild night was little more than two years past, now, but I held no fear of Roy's. While it was no place for gentle people, it was not a haven for crime.

I came again to Roy's in mid-spring, accompanying my Uncle Abner, who chose this as a place to meet with some drovers to discuss a new plan he had in mind. He would not be returning home immediately and I was to go back with a report to my father, who would also be involved.

When we entered, only two persons were there, Roy and Squire Randolph. They were seated in conversation at one of the smaller rough tables. Roy, a burly man with greying black hair and a complexion advertising a close relationship with his own bar, started to rise. Then he recognized us and sat down again.

"Hello, Abner," he said. "You'll be wanting nothing from me, I know. You're welcome to sit."

My uncle explained our reason for being there and led me to a

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larger table to wait. It was clear that Randolph and Roy were not having a social conversation, although each had a tankard of ale before him. Roy's invitation had not included joining them.

"Be in no haste to leave, Abner," Randolph called. "I should welcome your company."

Before Uncle Abner could reply, the door opened again and a man stepped in. Because I was impatient to get home, I looked at him in hopes that he was a drover, but I was disappointed. From his garb, this was a sailor—or had been.

He looked at all of us, then went to a small table and sat there alone.

Roy got to his feet again and went to the man. "Were you looking for lodging for the night or were you after a drink?" he asked.

"A tot o' rum," the customer said, laying a coin on the table.

While Roy went for the drink, I studied the man. Until then, I had seen no sailors, although I had sometimes seen sketches of them in the papers Randolph usually had in his office. His trousers and his jacket were of heavy dark-blue material and his knit cap was of the same color. The thing that most identified him to me was the pair of large rings, either gold or some other yellow metal, passing through the lobes of his ears.

The drink came and he sat there silently taking sips.

Roy had gone back to talking to Randolph, but now his voice was raised.

"I'd be glad to put up Smallwood's posters. All he needed was to ask. Instead, he threatens me—says by law I must do it."

Randolph's answer was louder, too, from indignation. "Do as you please, man. He cannot coerce you. Smallwood is not the best of sheriffs, but I have no intention of discussing him. Just do as I suggest."

"I shelter no fugitives," Roy said. "If he gives me those sheets on wanted men, I'll display them, but I'll not be bullied or have my name blackened if I choose not to."

"And you are right," Randolph said. "If he says otherwise, send him to me."

The room had scarcely become quiet again when the sailor spoke up. He addressed Uncle Abner.

"Sir," he said in a tone not at all gruff, "do you ever find the ways of the Lord beyond understanding?"

"I can give you no easy answer," my uncle replied. "At times I fail

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to understand, only to reach realization much later. Even so, there are mysteries."

"There is one mystery I can't fathom," the other man went on. "Cain committed the worst sin of all, but his Maker marked him—to protect him from the hand of those who would harm him. Yet he permits the innocent also to be marked, and shame can be their lot. Have you come to understand that?"

"No," said Uncle Abner. "Some would answer you, but not I."

Roy looked at the sailor's glass. "Ready for another?"

"Not yet," the seaman replied. "I asked for drink, but no lodging. Now I ask for information. I came because I was told I might find it here."

"That's as may be," Roy said.

The sailor stared at each of us in turn. "I'm tired of the sea. I want to settle down, away from the storms and the other things that bring death to look a man in the face. I have some landward skills. Where might I find work?"

Uncle Abner considered him. He was only average in height and not heavily built, but a life on the deep should have toughened him. I could read that in my uncle's scrutiny.

"How old are you?" my uncle asked.

"Twenty-three."

"Have you had any experience with animals?"

"I lived on a farm on the other side of the big mountains before I went to sea."

"I am organizing a drove from here to the Ohio," Abner said. "Do you think you could do such work?"

The sailor considered this. "It should be easier than a drove from here to Baltimore."

My uncle nodded. "The distance is shorter, and I intend to have the beasts loaded on a riverboat to Cincinnati. They should lose less weight than they would on the long miles and steep slopes to the east. I am also told that the slaughter houses of Cincinnati want an unending supply of pigs."

The seaman was about to make some comment, but my uncle's last sentence had a most extraordinary effect. His face blanched and his eyes stared. "Pigs—did you say pigs?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"I did," Uncle Abner answered bluntly. "My principal interest is cattle, but I also have success with swine. Many raisers of livestock do the same."

"Cattle, yes—but I want nothing to do with pigs."

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"You have a sensitive nose, man," my uncle remarked in a dry tone.

The other man swallowed. "In hot countries, they are an abomination. Filth—"

"Very well," Abner said. "That is all I can offer you."

Randolph spoke up. "Do you find horses repulsive?"

The seaman turned to him, color returning to his face. I noticed then that his eyes were blue and a yellow thatch showed beneath his cap. A well made sort.

"Sir, I might have been born in a stable."

"You would not be the first," Randolph remarked. "However, the fellow who has just left me was not."

He went on to outline the responsibilities that the work required. There were five horses to be tended: one to draw Randolph's gig; a riding horse each for Randolph and his daughter, Betty, when she returned home; and two to pull a wagon for transporting the household needs. Not only were the animals to be tended, but their gear and the vehicles were to be maintained. In return, Randolph promised a decent wage and living quarters.

"And what is your name?" he asked.

"Daniel Makepeace, sir," the sailor answered.

"Well, then, Makepeace," Randolph went on, "I can give you a room, but if you were married you would fare much better. I have a small cottage standing empty, but I prefer that it not be occupied by a lone man."

"I am married," Makepeace said. "My wife waits outside in our wagon." At Randolph's frown, he added, "I thought this might be an unsuitable place for a woman."

"True enough," Randolph agreed, "but not now. Bring her in."

The seaman went out and returned in a moment with a young woman dressed in sober grey garments, although her bonnet was trimmed in white. When I saw her, I almost lost my hopeless love for Betty Randolph, especially since Betty was now married and living apart from her widower father.

This young woman's hair was black as deepest night, her skin the purest white, and her eyes the deep blue of a mountain pool under a cloudless sky. She matched her husband's height, but she was as delicate as a snowdrop.

"Squire Randolph," Makepeace said, "this is my wife, Rachel."

Randolph introduced her in turn to my uncle and me and to Roy. "Young lady," he said, "your husband has agreed to work for me.

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We shall endeavor to give you a pleasant place to live. Does that sound like something you want?"

"It does, sir," she replied. "Have you any duties you would want me to perform?"

He shook his head. "None. My housekeeper, Mammy Liza, and my other servants look after my needs very well. When my daughter comes home, you might exchange experiences, but she is much in love and her ears might be tuned to other sounds."

He rapped the table lightly with his stick. "But you will be wanting to be settled. Unless Roy has more questions of me?" Roy shook his head. "Well, then, come along. Just follow my gig with your wagon."

When they had gone, Roy looked at Uncle Abner. "A strange-talking one, with strange dislikes, eh, Abner?"

"To us, perhaps," said my uncle. "Among men of the sea, we might seem equally strange."

"You're right," Roy agreed. "Enough odd ones come through."

Abner only nodded. We settled back to wait for the drovers.

Two weeks later, while I was by the road that passed our house, Uncle Abner rode up to see my father. Just as he arrived, Randolph's housekeeper, Mammy Liza, came past, driving Randolph's gig. At a signal from Abner, she reined in the horse.

The black woman must have been no longer young, but there was no grey in her hair, and no lines in her face except a pair running from below her square spectacles to the edges of her mouth. She was all in black, even to her bonnet. She sat upright in the seat of the gig, as regal as any queen.

"Good day, Mars Abner. And good day to yo', young Martin," she greeted us.

"And to you, Mammy Liza," my uncle said. "You might be in a hurry and I'll not cause you to tarry. How do you like the new groom the Squire brought home?"

The housekeeper hesitated, then decided that Makepeace was also a paid member of Randolph's staff. "He fine wit' horses," she said. "He got a way wit' things, too. You know—*things*." She hesitated again. "Jus' one fault—"

"What is that?"

She looked at Abner. "He keep a bottle o' rum all the time. Jus' one, an' doan drink much o' that. But he make a mark on it often. Why? He think some o' us get at that bottle? No, Mars Abner. I wouldn' let 'em!"

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Knowing the rock-like integrity of the woman, my uncle probed deeper. "Would you say he is honest?"

"That mebbe too soon to say, Mars Abner—but I think he is. Not seen nothin' yet to make me think not."

"And his wife?"

Uncertainty momentarily showed on Mammy Liza's face. "She so good to look at, yo' might fergit things. I dunno what she *is* like, 'cept mighty neat an' clean. But—"

Abner quietly urged her on. "But you don't like her?"

The woman's mouth set in a straight line. "Doan like, doan not like. Only thing—I wonder she thinks 'bout Mars Rans wit' no wife or chile in the house."

"I see," Uncle Abner remarked softly.

When he said no more, Mammy Liza dipped her chin in farewell, shook the reins, and drove away.

As I walked toward Uncle Abner, he was turned in the saddle, watching the departing gig.

I heard him say to himself, "David? Bathsheba?" He shook his head.

In a few more weeks, another stranger appeared among us.

My mother had discovered, to her chagrin, that our supply of pepper was exhausted. Since my father applied it liberally to much of his food, she sent me to buy some after school.

In front of the courthouse, I encountered a commotion. Randolph's wagon stood in the middle of the road, with Makepeace holding the reins and his wife beside him on the seat. He was trying to urge the team on, but a stranger was holding firmly to the bridle of the horse on the side where Rachel Makepeace sat. A few hundred feet away, Sheriff Smallwood was hastening toward the group. Almost on his heels came Uncle Abner.

"I'll hold this horse until she comes down from there, Makepeace!" the stranger was shouting.

The sailor reached for the whip beside him. "I'll come down and lay this whip across your shoulders, Thornton." He moved to follow his warning.

"Stay where you are!" the sheriff shouted. "There'll be none of that here, or I'll have both of you in jail!"

Makepeace stopped and sat down again. His adversary looked around.

"Sheriff! The very man I need to see," he said.

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Although it was clear that some dispute was going on, the man had done the clever thing by his remark to the sheriff. Asbury Smallwood was far from the man his successor, Thaxton, was, and he was quick to prejudice. Not only had this Thornton called on him, but the newcomer seemed a man of substance.

Smallwood eyed the group and addressed Thornton. "Is it something to be discussed in private?"

Both Makepeace and Thornton were of average height, but Thornton was broader, with no fat. He was a darkly handsome man with luxurious side-whiskers, but there was something about his small mouth and blank dark eyes that made me uneasy.

"Why, no," he answered Smallwood. "I am the wronged person and I have nothing to hide." He pointed to Rachel Makepeace. "That woman is my wife and I have come to take her home. The fellow beside her stole her from me and he tries to prevent her from going."

"And she did not divorce you?" Smallwood asked.

"No. That man came as a thief in the night and she went with him."

The sheriff turned to the woman. "What do you say to this?"

She shrank back. Her reply could scarcely be heard. "It's not true. We have never been married. I wed Daniel Makepeace to escape that man. We came here to make a new start."

"She lies," Thornton said bluntly. "If she's married to that thief, she is a bigamist. I suggest that you arrest her and send her back to Winchester with me for trial."

Makepeace arose from his seat again, clutching the whip.

"You can't blacken my wife's name!" he shouted. "We have the marriage license at Randolph's. I'll be glad to show it!"

"If bigamy is involved, it would be worthless," Smallwood commented.

"Unless the charge is worthless," another voice remarked.

We all turned at this. Uncle Abner was towering behind Smallwood.

"Worthless?" demanded Thornton. He stared at Abner. "Are you a man of law? How can you say the charge is worthless if you have never seen me?"

"I am no lawman or lawyer," my uncle replied. "I am only interested in justice. I said *unless* it is worthless." He looked up at Makepeace. "You do, indeed, have a marriage license to show?"

The sailor's fair skin flushed with indignation. "I do."

Abner then turned to Thornton. "Do you?"

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Thornton's face went livid as the blood drained from it. "A marriage license? Why should I have one with me?"

"Yes, Abner," said Smallwood, "you can easily see that this man is one whose word is good. Why should he carry such a thing?"

My uncle observed both Thornton and the sheriff. "If Randolph were here, there is something he might say. I have heard it from him often, and I can repeat it: *There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face.*"

As Smallwood began to scowl, Abner went on. "He says he came here to find his wife. He should have expected to be challenged. Even the Master had his Thomas. A man with the right on his side would surely arm himself with proof as an act of prudence. You are either an imprudent man, Thornton, or your charge is worthless."

Thornton glared at him. "I might be imprudent, but I do not have to answer to you! I can sign any paper the sheriff wants and swear to it."

Abner spoke to the sheriff. "Even the Devil will acknowledge the greatness of the Lord if it suits his purpose. Let this man return to Winchester and come back with the document."

Smallwood was uneasy. He was obliged to cooperate with Randolph, but not with Abner. Still, my uncle's integrity and standing with his peers was such that the sheriff listened. "What Abner has said is not unreasonable," he agreed finally. "Thornton, I suggest that you do what he proposes."

The dark man finally let go of the horse. "If that's what it takes to get an honest man's rights in a thieves' haven, I'll do it. You can expect me to come back."

He strode off.

Makepeace looked down from the wagon. "Sir, I thank you. Few men I have encountered on sea or land have been so fair."

"I would do it for any man," Abner replied. Then he saw me. "Martin, did your mother send you here?"

I explained my errand.

"You had better finish, then," he said. "There is nothing more here."

"That man will return," I said.

"Perhaps," he remarked. "Whether he does or not, something is unfinished."

I heard that Thornton did not leave immediately, for the next

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stage to the east was not due for three days. He was not widely seen, however. It was said that he spent his time in Spring's Tavern.

Two more months passed and I had almost forgotten all of these things. By now we were into early July and summer brings many things to draw a youth's attention.

About then Mammy Liza drove past our house at a time when my mother was outside attending to her flowers. I was helping by weeding where she indicated.

Mammy Liza turned the gig in when she saw us and reined in close to where we worked.

"Good day, Miss Miriam," she said, "We run out o' butter. We churnin' up some fresh, but I doubt it be ready fo' Mars Rans' supper. He deman's it fo' his biscuits. Could yo' spare a mite? I send you some tomorrow."

"Surely," my mother said. She went into the house and came back with a clean cloth and a knife.

"Martin," she said, "go to the springhouse and get this much butter—" measuring with her fingers "—wrap it, and bring it back."

When I returned, my mother and Mammy Liza were talking.

"Then the Squire has not been sorry he took on this man," my mother was saying.

"No'm," the old woman replied. "Her, neither. One time, I sho' he done some thinkin' 'bout her, then he realize that be fool's ways. Now I don' know if he suspec' same thing as me. End nex' winter, mebbe some earlier, they really be a family, not jus' they two, that sailor and her."

"Is that so!" my mother exclaimed. "How good for them!"

"I don' think she tell him yet," the housekeeper said.

"She will," my mother said. "She must, sometime."

Mammy Liza saw me listening and looked at my mother. My mother smiled. "It's all right. We live on a farm."

Mammy Liza showed the beginnings of a smile. Then she roused the horse and left.

The next morning I decided to go fishing in the river behind Uncle Abner's property. He was busy inspecting some calves as I passed, discussing them with one of his field hands, and he only gave me a wave of the hand.

My luck was none too good, and before long I tired of not getting a single bite, so I wrapped my line around the pole and leaned it against a tree. I put my bait bucket beneath it and set off toward Randolph's to see if any fish were visible in the shallows there.

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I had scarcely set foot on Randolph's land when I saw something from the tail of my right eye. It was in a clump of trees. I could not identify it, but I sensed that it did not belong there. I pushed through a tangle of weeds and saplings and saw one of the strangest sights I have ever witnessed.

It was an unmoving man. I could not tell whether or not I knew him because of the way he was. He neither sprawled on the ground nor sat. His back was to me and he seemed to be kneeling with his head between two hackberry saplings. These young trees grew so close together that I wondered if he had fallen and wedged his head between them.

I hesitated. If he were dead, he was beyond help. If he lived, I did not know what to do to aid him.

I ended my dilemma by walking around to the front of him. What I saw then was stranger still.

The man was unconscious. His shoulders were braced against the saplings, and I could see them rise and fall faintly as he breathed, but even as I observed this I became as transfixed as Lot's wife. This man was nailed to the saplings on either side of his head. Stout, square nails held the lobes of his ears to the living wood!

The shock of what I saw drove every calm thought from my mind. I felt that I recognized this person, but I could not name him. What if I could? It would not help him. I should go for assistance, but the thought of what could happen if he came to without realizing his plight was almost too much for me. I ended by approaching him without touching him, so that I might do something if anything could be done.

"Martin, what has happened?" a voice said even as my mind was still chasing itself.

I looked up. Uncle Abner sat on his great chestnut horse on the riverbank, just outside the clump of trees. The soft earth along the stream had muffled the sound of his coming. "You had better see for yourself," I answered, and tried to explain as best I could.

My uncle dismounted quickly and tied the horse to a sapling, then he was beside me, staring at the bizarre scene.

"Thornton!" he exclaimed. "We must free him quickly! Stay where you are, Martin, and if he tries to move, do what you can to prevent it."

He went back to his horse and opened one of his saddlebags. He came back carrying a stout pair of pincers.

"Hold his head, if you can, Martin," he said.

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I positioned myself behind Thornton's head and grasped it as firmly as I could. Uncle Abner gripped the head of one nail firmly with the pincers. With the other hand, he held tightly to the sapling. He pulled firmly and steadily, and the nail gradually came free.

I felt some faint response in Thornton. "He might be awakening," I said.

"Then I must be quick," my uncle responded. He repeated his action on the other nail.

"Now we must get these things from his ears," he said. Laying the pincers down, he gently worked both nails free without tearing the flesh. Each wound bled freely, but not for long.

By this time, Thornton had begun to groan. Abner told me to let him go, then he lifted him and put him down on his back in the leaf mold.

Thornton opened his dark eyes. He blinked at us in puzzlement. Suddenly his gaze focused on Abner.

"You! Why did you hit me?" Other awareness also came to him. "What's wrong with my ears?"

"I did not hit you," Abner replied. "Another person did that. My nephew found you nailed to two saplings by your ears. I freed you." He held out the bloodied nails.

Thornton heard this, and I am certain that a wariness came into his face. He started to lift his head, but he groaned and felt his neck. "Whoever did it hit hard. I thank you both for your kindness."

"Who can have done this?" my uncle asked.

"I am unable to guess," Thornton answered, trying to rise.

"We had better get you to the sheriff to report it."

Thornton refused to do this, saying that he had not been robbed and that he supposed that he had surprised some wandering rogue who was more of a ruffian than ordinary. The rascal would be long-gone, he said.

Uncle Abner listened to him, but his gaze wandered from time to time. When Thornton was done, he did not press his suggestion. "This is an action that cannot be forced on you," he said. "However, you were attacked on Randolph's land and he is entitled to know of any marauder's presence. I see that your horse is just above us in the field."

Thornton clearly would have protested more but he could find no excuse.

Abner saw this, I could tell. "If you doubt your ability to ride, let

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my nephew, Martin, handle the horse. Get into the saddle behind him and hold to him."

"Hold to him?" Thornton protested. "A mere youth?"

"I trust him," Abner said. "Are you less an able man?"

After we had helped Thornton up the bank to the field, I mounted his horse. I recognized it as a roan kept by Spring's Tavern for the use of guests. With an assist from my uncle, Thornton got up behind me. He was unwilling to hold to me, but he did.

I led. I knew from Uncle Abner's remarks that he wanted me to go to Randolph's office, located in a separate wing of his house. Abner followed, I think because he wanted to be sure not to lose Thornton.

While we were still some distance from the small house where Makepeace and his wife were living, I saw one of Randolph's servants leading Old Doctor Storm up to the door. I said nothing. Uncle Abner also made no comment.

While we were passing the house, the door opened and Mammy Liza appeared on the stoop. When she saw us, she stopped and raised a hand.

"Mars Abner. Good I see you. You goin' see Mars Rans?"

"We are," my uncle answered.

"You wait." She went into the house and reappeared with a liquor bottle and a folded cloth.

"Take this to Mars Rans and tell him this family be no bigger this time." She touched the cloth. "Reason part of what in here." She touched the cloth again, then the bottle. "The rest, I doan know, but I worry."

Uncle Abner lifted a corner of the cloth. I was only able to see a bit of some plant. "She drank a decoction of this?" he asked.

"May be," the old woman said.

"Where is her husband?" my uncle asked.

"When trouble started an' he guess what she do, he run out an' rode off. Then she start screamin' an' I come over."

Abner looked into the cloth again, then refolded it and looked at the bottle. "The liquid is higher than the mark," he said, but he got no answer. "Mammy Liza," he continued, "are there any chickens past their usefulness?"

"They's one ol' rooster too mean for any good anymore."

Abner held out the bottle. "Pour some of this—down to the mark—into an old dish and give it to the fowl. Then bring me the

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bottle and tell me if anything happens. We are going to Randolph's office."

When Mammy Liza had taken the bottle, Uncle Abner led us on to Randolph's house, carrying the folded cloth.

"That was a strange happening," Thornton commented.

"It is no stranger than your own misfortune," Abner said. "I believe it is all of a piece."

I could feel Thornton sit straighter. "Then you must tell me how it is," he said.

"Perhaps I can," Abner said, "but first we must see Randolph."

Presently we sat around Randolph's table. As usual, when anything presumed to deal with the law came before him, Randolph adopted a pompous bearing.

Uncle Abner had seen no sign that Randolph recognized Thornton. He corrected that by making introductions. "Thornton is here because he was attacked on your land down by the river. He thinks you should know it."

"On my land!" Randolph exclaimed. "Indeed I do want to know it, sir! What happened?"

Thornton looked uncomfortable. "I went riding along the river, where it is cool. Some villain I did not see came from behind and assaulted me, knocking me unconscious. These persons found me and helped me to get here."

Randolph eyed Thornton's wounded ears. "Is that all?"

The man shrugged. "I sustained some cuts when I fell."

Uncle Abner had his right fist closed. He opened it and laid the bloodstained nails on the table.

"We found him unconscious. He was fastened between two saplings. Nailed by the ears."

Randolph's eyebrows soared. "Nailed by the ears! Do you know what this means, Abner? Do you, Thornton? Someone has attempted to take the law into his own hands!" He leaned across toward Thornton. "What have you done, man? Where have you stolen?"

The man's face suffused with blood. "I have done nothing! I have not stolen anywhere!"

Uncle Abner turned to face him. "It might be that you have not stolen, Thornton. I am certain that you have done something, but what it is will only be clear later."

Thornton looked at each other man in turn. "One thing is clear to me—I never intend to come here again. I visited the place before

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and was told to go home for a piece of paper. I return and I am assaulted and accused of some unspecified crime!"

Randolph gently lifted his gold-headed stick from beside him and touched one of Thornton's wounded ears. "You bear the mark, sir. Not lawfully, I'll grant, but you bear it."

"Nor is he the only one," my uncle said.

Randolph was surprised. "Another? But—"

He was interrupted by a short knock at the outer door. Then, without pause, the door was opened and Mammy Liza stepped in. She carried a basket.

"Fo'give me, Mars Rans," she said. "Mars Abner ask fo' this." She held out the basket to my uncle.

It contained a dead rooster and the bottle I had seen.

"Thank you, Mammy Liza," Uncle Abner said. "How is she?"

"Doc Storm say he bring her aroun' a'right. She jus' need to get strength back."

As she left, Randolph eyed the basket in perplexity. "When you are done bringing me riddles, Abner, I wish you would bring me the answers," he said.

Abner set the basket beside him and placed the bottle on the table. Beside it, he put the cloth Mammy Liza had given him. The nails completed the exhibit.

"Now," he said, "almost everything is here."

Even as he said it, there was a sound of diminishing hoofbeats which stopped just outside. A perfunctory knock sounded and the door opened.

Makepeace strode in, dusty and disheveled.

"Mammy Liza told me she was asked to bring—" He caught sight of Thornton. "You here! Some can be brazen beyond—" His glance fastened on the bottle. He reached for it. "I'll need this, it seems."

"Stop!" Uncle Abner thundered. His big hand shot out and grasped the sailor's wrist before the man could touch the bottle. "If you drink that, you are a dead man!"

Makepeace attempted to shake free. "It's my rum. Let go!"

"It is your own liquor and something more," my uncle said grimly. He held up the basket with the dead fowl plain to see. "I told Mammy Liza to pour from the bottle and give it to this bird. See the result!"

The sailor looked at the corpse, then at the bottle. "It must be another bottle. The level is at the mark."

"She used what had been added," Abner said.

"But what is happening?" Makepeace asked.

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"Now that you are here, we can find out," my uncle answered. "But there remains one small thing." He gestured to Randolph. The two of them went to the outside door and by it, talking in low tones.

After a moment, Randolph turned and gestured toward the basket. "Will this new idea deplete my livestock any further?" I could hear him ask. Uncle Abner shook his head. Randolph stepped outside. "George!" I heard him call. In a few minutes I heard him giving orders, then he returned.

He grasped Abner by the arm and steered him to the table. "I can wait no longer," he said, sitting down again.

Uncle Abner also sat down. "We do have the beginning at last," he said, looking at Makepeace. "You are from Winchester, are you not?"

"Near there," the sailor responded.

"You are not a sailor."

"No." The man motioned toward Thornton. "Did he tell you?"

Abner shook his head. "You told me."

Makepeace was clearly baffled. "I told nobody."

"When you took vengeance on Thornton this morning, you told me. A vengeance in kind, it was."

Makepeace was vehement. "I have not harmed him."

"A real harm, no," Abner agreed. "Nevertheless, he was nailed up by the ears, as you were, on this land. This meant that either it was done as a whim by someone unknown, or it was done by someone here. Randolph had no reason to do it, his servants would never do violence to a white man unless directed, and your wife is in no condition to do it. But you, who carry tools in your saddlebags as part of your responsibility, could do it."

"A stranger did it!" Makepeace insisted.

"I think not," Abner said. "It is too outlandish a thing to do to someone you do not know.

"Now," he continued, "I put it to you: you posed as a sailor and put rings in your ears to conceal the fact that you were legally punished by being nailed up for stealing pigs. Perhaps you were innocent, man, but at least admit that it happened."

The man struggled with himself. "It happened. But I am not guilty."

"That we shall see," my uncle said. "How many pigs? Whose were they?"

Makepeace pointed at Thornton. "Only one. It was his."

Uncle Abner looked at me. "Martin, go to the door and see if

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anything is out there." As I got up, he addressed Makepeace again. "I intend to give you a test."

I opened the door and called back at once. "There's a man outside with a pig."

Abner stood up and grasped the younger man's arm. "Come with me."

Makepeace tried to resist. "No. You can't make me go. You must believe me without this."

His resistance was futile. My uncle moved him as he would a child to the place where they could see a black servant holding a rope that encircled the neck of a young pig.

"Now, Makepeace," Uncle Abner said, "take the rope and lead the beast to that tree and back."

The man was nearly weeping. "Beat me, if you like. Flog me. I won't do it."

"Why not?"

Makepeace took some minutes to become quiet. "When I was but a small child, I came down with a cholera. They said my father's hogs were the source. I nearly died from vomiting and the flux. I am sure that only God's hand spared me. I am stronger now, but I have always feared being close to swine."

"I see," my uncle said. "Take the pig away, George." He closed the door, released the man, and came back to the table.

He addressed Thornton. "You caused this man's arrest and prosecution. How did you know it was your pig? What caused you to believe he had stolen it?"

"I mark all of my pigs with a certain notch on the ear. It was on his land, in a hidden pen."

"That would be very convincing," Abner agreed. "Unless someone else did it. Let us look at another thing. Do you admire this man's wife, Rachel?"

"It would be difficult not to," Thornton said.

"Especially if that admiration were encouraged," my uncle observed. He shifted attention. "Is that your observation, Randolph?"

Randolph reddened and made incoherent noises.

"Come, Randolph," said Abner. "We are old friends, and I know that you are fundamentally a decent man. I only ask an opinion."

"An opinion—an objective opinion," Randolph spluttered, not meeting our gaze. "Such an opinion is that you are right."

"Thank you," my uncle said. "Now, Thornton, is that woman truly your wife? Has she ever been?"

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"No."

"Have you ever been her lover?"

"No. I kissed her once when chance threw us together in a neighbor's garden. I was wild for her, but I would only take her if she were no longer married."

Uncle Abner absorbed this information. "Who told you about the pig?"

"A servant. Where he learned it, I never knew."

Abner spoke, but it was to no one person. "Months ago, Makepeace refused to work for me because he feared pigs, but I did not understand. This morning, when I realized the nature of the vengeance against Thornton, I thought I finally understood. I was wrong. I must now go carefully.

"When the punishment for the alleged crime was carried out," he went on, "he might, in shame, have put himself apart from his wife, or she might have left him in humiliation. No such thing happened. Why?"

"I knew that I was innocent," Makepeace said. "I was willing to go westward to a new beginning, but I had no thought of giving up my wife. She could see that, I know."

"At this time," Thornton said slowly, "I was among three being considered as a special aide to the Governor. It was widely known that the man would have to be one of highest character. That might have had some influence. I did not get the appointment, however," he added.

"Yet you came here with the false claim of bigamy," Abner pointed out.

"This man's wife sent me a letter suggesting it. She said that your sheriff would send her with me and that her husband was too weak to oppose it. She had a plan for divorce, she hinted. I have the letter with me," he said.

"And you came back once more, even though you could bring no document to prove marriage," Uncle Abner insisted.

Thornton leaned his elbows on the table and rested his chin in his hand. "I have no quarrel with this man, although I had thought him a thief. Let us say that it is summer and call it madness."

Abner turned to Makepeace. "Tell us about your vengeance."

The man sighed. "I did it as you have said. In part, I blamed him for the injustice. But he had come here before, and I had heard that he had come again. My wife's misfortune had just started. I went

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to bring the doctor, but I saw him from a distance. I must have lost all reason, just as I realized that we were losing our child."

"You had no thought that it might not be yours?" Abner asked.

"Why, no," Makepeace said slowly. His face began to darken. "If I had thought—"

"Put the thought away," Abner said. "It was yours."

He unwrapped the cloth, exposing some limp and bedraggled plants and a number of purple berries. Some of the berries were flat and drained of substance, but others were whole. "You lost your child because of this," my uncle said in a heavy voice as he lifted the plants, "and because it was yours. She wanted nothing of yours to stand in the way when she was free again.

"And free she would have been, if it had not been for Mammy Liza. These," he said, picking up the berries, "are deadly nightshade. She put the juice into your rum, but she forgot the mark you made because you don't trust servants.

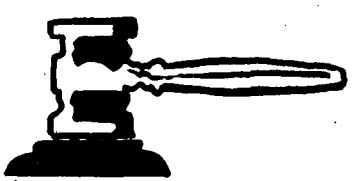
"If you are uncertain of what would have happened, look at this again." He held up the basket. The rooster's limp neck hung over the edge.

Makepeace gasped in horror. Then he began to weep. "What will become of her?"

Uncle Abner addressed Randolph. "Has a woman ever suffered the punishment for stealing a pig? That is the least that might be done."

"That is outside this jurisdiction," Randolph answered.

"Properly, all of this is in another Jurisdiction," my uncle reflected. "Perhaps an Opinion will be given us."



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the first Loren Swift short story by

DOUG HORNIG

"Access to Power" represents Doug Hornig's initial magazine appearance in the mystery field. His first novel, Foul Shot, *was nominated by the Mystery Writers of America for an Edgar in 1984. His second novel,* Hardball, *also from Scribners and also featuring Charlottesville, Virginia's only private investigator, Loren Swift, was published in October 1985.*

In Hardball, *Swift is involved in a dangerous election campaign for sheriff of Albemarle County. In "Access to Power," he also becomes involved in a political controversy, one he obviously feels strongly about. We hope you will not read it as a political treatise, however, but as the private-eye story it is—one with a most interesting look at state-of-the-art and one of its nefarious uses. We've come a long way from Uncle Abner's Virginia . . .*

ACCESS TO POWER

by DOUG HORNIG

Sometimes I wish they held elections every year. For private investigators, election times are the best of times. I'm no exception. Though I operate out of Charlottesville, Virginia, which is well removed from the political fast lane, I can still count on it. Whenever a campaign starts to heat up, there are folks out there who are going to find a need for my services.

At the season's peak, it can seem like everyone wants you. The politicians want you, the campaign managers want you, the lawyers want you. Information is power nowhere more so than in politics, and I am in the information business. Not that these characters are going to get *too* close. I still engage in a somewhat unsavory occu-

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pation. I'm a lot like the mistresses some of the good old boys keep stashed away down at the shore. They're not for public display, but when they're desired it's with a rabid intensity.

In the old days, a few years ago, I had a monopoly on the area's investigative work. I was the only P.I. in the Charlottesville phonebook. Now I'm just one of several, but I'm currently the most famous. Or infamous, depending on your point of view. There have been a couple of cases which have, shall we say, generated publicity. So during election season I kind of expect something to turn up at my answering service every few days. (I still haven't gotten around to getting an office and I hate those machines that allow you to leave your message at the sound of the beep.) I expect to be told to phone such and such a pol, or one of the innumerable hangers-on who crowd around candidates these days. I *don't* expect the caller to have been a U.S. congressman.

But that's what the lady said. "Congressman Styles' office called. They'd like you to get in touch as soon as possible."

"Congressman Styles?"

"That's what they told me," she said. "I guess you're going big time, Swift."

"Highly visible fish, exceedingly small pond."

"Cute. Is this what passes for one of your philosophical moods?"

"You know," I said, "you may have the world's sweetest voice, but you have a very abrasive personality. You should work on that."

" 'Bye, Swift," she said.

I called the number Styles' office had left. The congressman would like to meet with me himself, I was informed. Would tomorrow morning be convenient? I said that would be fine.

Congressman Stafford Styles didn't represent my district, but one of the adjacent ones. It wasn't that odd that he'd be contacting me. There weren't any large cities in his district. I was pretty well known in central Virginia. Even if there were any detectives on his home turf, he might shy away from using one.

Politically, Styles was a moderate. A real one. That's a rarity in Virginia politics. Usually "moderate" is merely a code word for someone whose idea of a rousing time would be dinner with Jesse Helms. The reason for this is that there is a formidable voting bloc out there on the right wing. Liberals are an endangered species almost everywhere in the state. True moderates can make it, but only if they're good and only if they don't seriously antagonize the conservatives.

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Styles was good. He was an excellent campaigner and had won reelection three times by successively greater margins. In Washington, he worked hard. He brought federal funds into his district with some regularity. And so far he'd managed to avoid antagonizing anyone of importance. That was an impressive track record.

In addition to his accomplishments, he also *looked* like a successful politician, and that can be just as important. He was tall and had a first-rate tailor. Although only in his mid-forties, he had a full head of silver hair, of which he was proud. He liked it that people could say, "There's a guy who can't be bothered dyeing his hair." It's the distinguishing mark of all great pols that they can simultaneously appear to be almost royalty and yet as down-to-earth as any of us common types. Styles could pull it off. No doubt about it, he was a comer. He was beginning to be talked up for the Senate—by no means against his wishes.

I drove to his office, which was in a small town about an hour from Charlottesville. My feelings were neutral. From what I'd read, Styles seemed like a decent sort. But I'd learned back in my Boston days that you believe in trolls and elves before you ever trust a politician.

On the other hand, their money was good in exactly the same number of places as somebody else's.

I was fifteen minutes late for my meeting. Now, I don't consciously try to keep my elected officials waiting. And I'm sure they don't consciously try to steal my hard-earned green.

"I'm Loren Swift," I told the receptionist.

"You're late," she said. "The congressman is a busy person."

"Me, too. The governor, whatnot. I was a while getting away."

She gave me a sour look and made me sit. I waited for fifteen minutes. Fair enough. Then I was admitted to the inner office.

I'd never seen Styles in person before, but I wouldn't have failed to recognize him. He's one of those people who photograph just about like they are. The silver hair was in place, nicely coiffed and set. None of the facial features called attention to itself, with the possible exception of the jaw, which was square and strong. The only thing I wasn't prepared for was his height. He's very tall. Six-four or -five. That's half a foot or more on me. He also looked physically fit, like maybe he'd played some ball in school and had kept in shape.

We shook hands and introduced ourselves. I told him to call me Swift and he said I could call him Stafford if I wanted to.

"All right," I said. "I take it you didn't invite me here because you

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need someone to put on a straw boater and go around handing out campaign buttons."

"No, and I don't need another trombone player." He smiled. He had very even teeth. I smiled back. "Let me just say something, Swift."

"I'll save you the trouble," I said. "You want me to know that you're not accustomed to dealing with someone in my, ah, profession."

"But, of course—you would hear that a lot."

"Invariably. I try not to let it bother me."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to imply that I consider myself superior or something. It's that I don't know quite how to, well—"

"Congressman, it's simple. I do just about anything that's within the law. I charge two hundred a day plus expenses." When my client can afford it. He could. "Anything I become involved in is completely confidential. If you've checked me out, which I'm sure you have, you know that I have a reputation for keeping my mouth shut. That's all you really need to know. Next you tell me what kind of problem you have. If I think I can help you, I'll take the job. If I don't, I won't. Either way, I don't talk. How's that?"

He cleared his throat. "That's fine," he said. "Yes, we did check. You come highly recommended. But you have to understand that this matter is somewhat—sensitive."

"They all are, Stafford. The guy who works in a machine shop and wants to know if his wife is cheating, that's a sensitive matter to him. I'll treat you with the same consideration I'd give him."

"Yes, of course. But, well, in my case, in any public figure's case, the problem usually affects more than one or two people."

"Political fallout," I said.

"That's one way of putting it. What happens to me ultimately affects thousands of people in my district. I do a good job for them and I don't want to see them hurt. Are you surprised that I called in an out-of-towner?"

"Not really. I've done political work before. I assume that you'd rather your staff didn't know what was going on. Also that you're afraid a local person might not be impartial. Someone like me is a lot less likely to want to do you harm."

"Very astute," he said. "Politics is a tricky business. You need to take risks, but you need also to minimize the possibility that they'll come back to haunt you. Sometimes your best bet is a complete stranger."

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"I understand, and I hope that I'll be able to help you. Could we get down to the job now?"

"Right. Well—this is an election year, as you know." I nodded. "And you are aware of who my opponent is?" I nodded again. "Just how much do you know about him?"

I told Styles what I knew about Elwin Beasley. That the man was as right wing as they come. That his political experience consisted of having served for one term on a county board of supervisors. That he'd been nominated only because he was backed by a coalition of fundamentalist Christian groups and that it was generally thought that his party had given up on defeating Styles but wanted Beasley's supporters in future campaigns and so were throwing them a sop here.

"That's pretty accurate," Styles said when I'd finished. "And you're correct in thinking that I didn't take Beasley's challenge too seriously. But something has—come up." He thought for a minute. "I suppose I have to trust you, don't I?"

He opened one of his desk drawers and took out a large manila envelope. He pulled an 8 × 10 photograph from the envelope and slid it across to me.

"This showed up in my mailbox at home last week," he said, "though it never went through the mail. There was no note, no return address, nothing. I think it's obvious where it came from. You're familiar with the gentleman?"

I nodded. The photograph was of Styles and a black man. The black man was a politically active minister from the southeastern part of the state. His politics were radical left. In fact, he'd been accused many times of being a Communist. He'd responded that he was only working on behalf of his people, but that his people's struggles were identical with those of oppressed people throughout the world. In an attempt to gain further leverage, the minister had threatened Styles' party with massive defections by black voters. These were voters that the party counted on. The party brass hated the minister. So did a large segment of the voting public. For a moderate white politician, then, any association with the activist clergyman was the kiss of death.

In the photograph, both Styles and the minister had broad smiles on their faces. They were embracing.

"You know the damage this could do," Styles said.

"Yeah," I said.

"I don't condone racism," he said. "My record is clean on that score.

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But there are certain political facts of life that have to be faced in Virginia."

"Shouldn't you have thought of that before you hugged him?"

"That's the point. I never did."

I looked again at the picture. I looked at it closely. I've seen a good number of doctored photos in my time. Most of them are so crude that it's obvious. Others are more cleanly done, but you can still usually tell. This one looked absolutely real.

"Congressman," I said, "you're going to have to level with me."

"I am," he said. "The thing is a fake."

"It doesn't look like one to me."

"I'm telling you the truth. I've never even met the man."

He looked me in the eye when he said it. I did my best to get behind the politician facade, where every line is delivered with equal sincerity. I decided that I believed him.

"All right," I said. "I'll accept that." He was visibly relieved. But the problem was that it didn't really matter if the photo *was* fake. If it were published, it would become the truth. There were a lot of innocent people with ruined reputations who'd learned that lesson the hard way. "But someone's done a hell of a job here," I added. "I assume that you take this as a threat."

"Yes. It would appear that I'm being shown how nasty the campaign might get. I've never had to fight that hard. Now they're testing me. I'd say they figure that I can't take the heat."

"And can you?"

There was a lengthy pause. "I don't know," he said finally. "And that's not the issue, really. I shouldn't have to put up with something like this. There are some basic unwritten rules here. You try to cast your opponent in an unfavorable light, sure, but out-and-out lying, that's not playing fair."

It might not be fair, but it was hardly unheard of. A number of past elections had been decided when the dead suddenly rediscovered the ability to cast a vote.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I want an honest campaign. What do you suggest?"

"Well, there are a couple of possibilities. I could try to persuade the opposition not to do this kind of thing. To be honest, they're not likely to respond to friendly persuasion. And I don't personally do the other sort. If you want to hire decent muscle, I can put you on to some, though."

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"Good God, no," he said quickly. "I'm not going to turn myself into what I'm working against."

He seemed sincere. "All right," I said. "I could try to cut a deal with them. Do you want that?"

"I don't know. It depends on the deal."

"We're assuming one which doesn't cost you that much. I'll feel them out."

"Be—discreet, will you, Swift? I can't authorize you to make any agreements on my behalf."

"Okay," I said. "Now, about the only other thing is to try and find out where they got this photo. If I can do that, it might give you enough clout that you could dictate the terms of the deal. But I have to be straight with you—you can hire me, and I can give it my best shot, and we can still come up empty. I'd say chances are pretty good that that's what will happen. This one is a hard go."

"I'll hire you," Styles said.

We settled on my fee. He promised a nice bonus if I was able to bail him out. It sounded good to me. I slid the photo back into its envelope and took it with me. It was the first time I'd ever been employed by a congressperson.

Elwin Beasley also had an office in the little town. I walked over there, enjoying the Indian-summer weather. It's a nice time of year in Virginia—still warm, with temperatures often getting into the eighties. And the air usually stays dry until the late-fall rains arrive.

I presented myself to Beasley's receptionist. I told her that I represented Stafford Styles. That was the secret word. She did a quickie phone check and informed me that I was in luck. Mr. Beasley was in and he'd consent to see me. I wasn't sure that fit *my* definition of luck.

Beasley kept me waiting for forty-five minutes. He could have been busy, but more likely it was an attempt to gain an early advantage. It didn't bother me. When you do investigations for a living, you learn how to wait or you end up in Bananaville.

I passed time reading some of the candidate's campaign literature, if you could call it that. Literary it was not. I'm no scholar of the language, but even I could tell that the writing was full of grammatical errors and crude sentence structure. I thought that that might be intentional. Elwin was trying hard to portray himself as the hero of the common man.

Politically, he was somewhere east of Genghis Khan. He called

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for immediate military intervention in Nicaragua, and an invasion of Cuba as well. He favored jail sentences for anyone receiving an abortion and the death penalty for anyone performing one. He opposed affirmative action of any kind and, naturally, weighed in for federal aid to private schools. He desired that all national parklands and forests be thrown open to mining companies, foresters, and anyone else who was prepared to "put the land to use."

I was setting down one pamphlet and reaching for another when I got the call from the man.

Beasley had a spartan office. A desk and two chairs and that was it. The man himself was impressive. Not quite as tall as Styles but bigger around. A bear. He had silver hair, too, but it was unkempt. There was a good deal of it, jutting out here and there from his head, which was large. His complexion was very ruddy. I would have pegged him for a juicer if he wasn't well known for a strong stand against alcohol. He'd even gotten the folks in his home county to vote on going dry. He'd lost that one. Beasley's county was poor, and the poor don't like to drive somewhere else to ease their pain.

The candidate looked me over.

"I'm Loren Swift," I said, shaking his hand. He tried to crunch my bones but I slipped his grip before he could do any real damage.

"Sit down," he said. We sat. "And who are you, Mr. Swift?"

"I represent Stafford Styles."

"What does that mean, 'represent'?"

"I work for him."

"Ah. You must be new. I don't recollect the name."

"I am new," I said. "There are some new problems."

"Mr. Do-gooder Liberal ain't got any new problems. All he's got is the same old one. He's a pantywaist. He ain't tough enough for the job and he should step aside and let someone in who is."

"You tough, are you?"

He grinned. "You want to try me?"

I'd be giving away four inches and a good fifty pounds. But he'd accumulated fifteen or so more years. It was a stupid thing to even think about. We were supposed to be adults.

"I'll take a raincheck," I said. "It seems like there must be better ways to resolve a dispute."

"What exactly are we disputating?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

"Mr. Swift, I don't care for guessing games."

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"All right. Let's say that Congressman Styles intends to run a hard but clean race and that he hopes you will be doing the same."

Beasley laughed. "I'll bet he does," he said. "I'll just bet he does. He getting worried, is he?"

"He doesn't strike me as a worrier."

"What are you offering, Swift?"

"I'm not 'offering' anything. I'm trying to find out if you're an honest man."

"Where you from, boy?" he asked.

"What does that matter?"

"I know you ain't no native Virginian. I don't believe you understand how our political system works down here."

"Mr. Beasley," I said, "I'm originally from Boston. The system doesn't get any dirtier than it is up there. I may not know all the local ins and outs, but it'd take a lot to surprise me."

"What're you in this for, you don't mind my asking. You look like a cop."

"I work for Congressman Styles. I'm not a cop."

"You his bodyguard? . . . Naw, you're supposed to come over here, lean on me a little bit, that it?"

"We've gone over why I'm here," I said, trying to keep the annoyance from creeping into my voice. "Do you think we can come to some kind of accommodation?"

"Accommodation. Now there's a nice word. Sure, we can come to an accommodation. If *Mis*ter Styles decided to retire, I'd feel very accommodated."

He sat there, looking smug. His hands were folded over his ample belly. Come to think of it, maybe I'd wind up punching him out after all. "Look," I said, "either we've got something to discuss or we don't."

"Discuss," he said. "I ain't stopping you."

"You're planning on releasing some information that could be damaging to your opponent."

He shrugged. "I don't reckon I could comment on that."

"That information is false."

"I wouldn't do such of a thing."

I sighed. "All right. This not-false information hasn't yet been released. What are you waiting for, Beasley? Do you want to make some kind of deal, or what?"

"I don't really know what information you're talking about. *Mis*ter Styles done some things that are embarrassing to him, then he

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oughtn't have done them. The voting folks have a right to know who they're voting for, I say. And I don't think there's any kind of deal to be had here. We need to get the man out of Washington. If he was to leave volunteer, well—" he shrugged again "—I wouldn't be the one as to blame him."

"What's the time frame?" I said.

"Say what?"

"Ah, never mind. All right, Beasley, I get the point. But you can't win an election by lying to the public. They'll find out."

I regretted saying it, it sounded so lame.

He smiled. "Swift," he said, "if I say something's so, then it's so."

I got the number of Operation Reform, the minister's grass-roots political organization down in southeastern Virginia. It was a group that was making a lot of people nervous. If it decided to form a party of its own, there was going to be a lot of turmoil.

The folks at Operation Reform were helpful. They told me that the minister was at a speaking engagement in Richmond and they gave me the number of the Richmond office. I phoned Richmond and introduced myself as a representative of Congressman Styles. I asked for a few minutes of the minister's time. I told them it'd take me about three hours to get to Richmond. They said, well, maybe I could get a little time in the late afternoon, but how did they know who I was? I gave them the number at Styles' office and told them to check me out and call back. They did, and we set up an appointment.

I didn't much feel like driving all the way to Richmond, but I felt it was my only option. Beasley was going to wait until Styles made him some kind of offer. If he didn't get what he wanted, he'd turn the photo loose. How long this would take I didn't know, but I couldn't afford to wait around to find out. I needed to take some kind of positive action. Trying to establish if the photo was genuine seemed like the best bet.

It was a long, boring drive. It landed me up in Tobacco Town at an aging clapboard-sided house. Outside was a sign with Operation Reform's logo printed on it. The sign was in green, black, and red, the colors of the disenfranchised nation within a nation.

I wasn't quite prepared for the Reverend's physical presence. He wasn't a big man, but he had that aura of power about him that's worth any amount of size. You knew that this was a leader. I wasn't surprised that he made a lot of people nervous.

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"And what exactly is it that you do, Mr. Swift?" he asked me. "The congressman's office was rather vague."

Once you got past the power, he had a pleasant, friendly face. His black hair was speckled with grey. He smiled a lot. I reminded myself that while he was a crusader, he was no violent political hothead. From all reports, his ultimate trust was genuinely in the Lord.

"Troubleshooting," I said. "I'm a troubleshooter."

He gave me an ironic smile. "You *want* something," he said.

"In a manner of speaking."

"There's no manners of speaking here. I don't see you'all from one year to the next without you want something. Sooner you get to it the better."

He was right, there was no sense in beating around the bush. I'd been tabbed as an emissary from the white establishment. Already my welcome was beginning to decay. So I handed him the photo. He looked at it and immediately burst out laughing.

"It's a fake, isn't it?" I said.

"Well," he said, "that'll be the day all right, that'll be the *day*. What did you want me to do with this?"

"Nothing. I wanted to know if it was real. Now I know."

"That be it, then?"

"Well," I said, "not really. I was hoping we could—discuss it."

He chuckled. "You people break me up," he said. "Why can't you'all just talk straight out to a black man? What is it, you think we're just that dumb?"

"No, I don't think that at all."

"You may not think it, but you sure act it. Let's see if I can't help you out. You got this picture, which I think is good for a laugh, but your boss don't see it that way. He thinks it might do him some harm when the white folks vote. So he wants to know, am I gonna do anything about it? That about cover it?"

"That about covers it. I don't care for the situation any more than you do. Nevertheless, it's the way things are. Now you might not be crazy about Styles, but, Reverend, you've *got* to like Beasley a whole lot less."

"Mr. Swift, I'd appreciate it if you didn't try to put yourself in my shoes. It's not possible, you know?" I nodded. "Good. Yes, I'm aware of the political facts of life in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Lived here all my days. That's what we're going to change, those facts. And the way to do that is not by jumping every time some white

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politician asks us to. Styles or Beasley, it don't matter. What matters is building our own power base. You follow me?"

"I follow you," I said. "How about if the photo's published? Would you be willing to say it's a phony?"

"I do that, I'm still just playing their pawn, ain't I?"

"You're a hard case, Reverend. You really *don't* care who wins, do you?" He shook his head. "I believe you enjoy watching them squirm."

"Me?" He feigned astonishment. "How could you say something like that about me?" He grinned.

Damned if I didn't find myself grinning along with him.

I drove back home to Charlottesville running out of options, but I had one idea left. I called my pal Jonesy. He works for the *Daily Press* and can sometimes dig up things I can't.

"Swift," he said, "the intangible man."

"All right," I said, "all right. I realize I haven't been over to watch the O's with you in a while. I've been busy, Jones. Soon, okay?"

"Sure, sure. You need something. What is it?"

"Where would I go to get a photo retouched? I want the best."

"Hmmm," he said, "you've got me. Is it worth a six-pack of Moosehead?"

"Yeah." The man worked better when he had an incentive.

"Okay. One of our photographers knows all about that stuff. I'll ask him in the morning. Get back to ya."

Which he did, about nine the following day.

"Swift," he said, "let me ask you something. How good a job are you looking to get done?"

"I want to put two photos together so it looks like they always were."

"Okay. In that case you're gonna have to go out of town. There are some people locally who can do a nice job. But a professional could spot it. If you want it so even a pro can't say for sure, then you gotta go state-of-the-art. That's a Chromacom. Or a Scitex, one."

"What in God's name is that?"

"Digital retouching, Swift. They do it with lasers and computers now. It beats all hell out of a knife and a bunch of darkroom chemicals. All the big boys have these machines. You know—*Time, National Geo,* everybody. But the things are a bit pricey. Over a mil each. No one in Charlottesville could justify laying out that kind of bread. There aren't even any in Richmond. You'll have to go to D.C."

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"What am I supposed to do, walk into your beloved *Washington Post* and ask to use their—what is it?"

"Chromacom. Naw, they wouldn't let you. Fortunately, I'm a thorough man. Got a pencil handy?" He gave me an address in Northwest D.C. "That's an outfit called Capitol Lasergraphics. They must do an awful good business, because they've got one. You can rent it if you want. If your, uh, client can afford it."

"How much?" I asked, and I nearly fainted when he told me. I thanked him and promised him a couple of six-packs of Moosehead.

Then I phoned Styles' office. He wasn't there, but I told them to track him down, give him my name, and tell him it was important. He called back in half an hour. I filled him in on my lack of progress thus far and said I wanted to go to D. C. to talk with some retouching experts. I told him I might need to rent the Chromacom and how much it would cost. He took it well. I asked him to get in touch with Capitol Lasergraphics and say that one of his aides was on the way and would they give me every possible attention. He agreed to do it.

Before leaving Charlottesville, I stopped by the *Daily Press* and had Jonesy pull me a few items from the morgue. The seed of an idea was beginning to sprout.

Capitol Lasergraphics had several floors of a shiny glass building just off Connecticut Avenue. They were doing just fine. You didn't need major-league brains to figure out how business could be so good that they'd be able to afford million-dollar equipment. The ability to manipulate information gives you access to power. And if you have access to power, you make money. Serious money. A congressional race in rural Virginia was small potatoes, relatively speaking, but what had happened there could happen anywhere, up to and including the highest levels of power. The implications were unsettling.

My guide at Capitol was a bouncy little fellow named Robert (call me Bob) Beauregard. He was short and chubby, smiled incessantly, and had almost no hair on his head.

"Congressman Styles is a fine man," Bob said. "How may we help you?"

"The congressman is concerned about the potential of the new digital retouching machines," I said. "He wants me to investigate them. Do you do any political work here?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

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"If someone wanted you to create a photo of Ronald Reagan doing the two-step with Yassir Arafat, would you do it?"

"I see," he said. "You want to know if we make judgments of content. Let me just say one thing, Mr. Swift. The law is absolutely clear in this matter. There is nothing illegal about doctoring a photograph. We do nothing illegal here. The man who makes *use* of the photograph, now *he* is open to a libel suit if that photo causes mischief, of course."

"I'm not sure that answers my question," I said.

"Perhaps not. Sure, we'd put Reagan and Arafat together. The effect would be rather humorous, and I suppose that would be the intent. We don't feel it's our function to act as censor."

"Isn't there a moral issue involved?"

"Not really. That's the business of whoever uses our services. Our business is graphics."

"And business appears to be booming."

He shrugged as if it wasn't worth mentioning. I considered what I might do next. There was a fair possibility the Beasley people had had the work done here. It was the closest place. But Capitol's client list was undoubtedly confidential. Just as I undoubtedly could use Styles to pry the information out of them. However, I had no way of knowing what name the job had been requested under. And even if I did find that a job had come in from central Virginia, what then? Capitol would be discreet. They wouldn't keep copies of the work unless the client asked them to. In this case, there was no chance the client would have asked them to.

"Could I see the machine?" I asked.

"Certainly," said Bob.

It took up most of a small room. "This is the laser scanner," he explained, gesturing at a formidable piece of machinery. "It's the first step in the process. You lay the material to be worked on here." He pointed to a clear glass drum. "The scanner then translates that material into precise digital code, which is stored in the computer." He indicated the console. "At that point, we can call up what we have and display it on the large viewer here. Then we can do anything we want with it.

"The computer reduces the overall visual image to tiny elements called pixels. A pixel can be smaller than the grain in a photograph. Since we can make changes at the pixel level, we can obviously manipulate the image at will, and our efforts will be undetectable. Questions?"

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Yeah, I thought, lots of questions. But they weren't technical ones. I handed him the folder I'd brought from Charlottesville.

"Show me how it works," I said.

For the next four hours, I watched Bob in action. In a way, it was a truly depressing experience. Because, for me, it was the end of photography as something I took for granted. I knew that I'd never again be able to completely trust a photograph.

The rest was easy. I made an appointment to see Beasley the following day and drove back down to his office. We sat across the desk from one another.

"I hope you're not wasting my time, Mr. Swift," he said.

"Beasley," I said, "I don't like you or anything you stand for. I don't know what's worse, the dirty things you do or the fact that you hide them behind pious pamphlets."

His ruddy face got even ruddier. His right fist clenched reflexively. He opened his mouth to say something.

"Just shut up," I said. "Now what I do know is that this campaign is going to be a clean one. The voters of this district may in their lack of wisdom see fit to send you to Congress, but it's not going to be due to any of your cheap lies."

I opened my folder and flipped the photograph across to him. He stared at it, uncomprehending at first. Then the lines of rage formed around his mouth and eyes.

I'd had Bob join three separate photos. The first was a stock picture of a Charlottesville motel. I'd chosen one of Beasley in which he had a somewhat surprised expression on his face. And the third was of Virginia's most outspoken feminist, a thirty-year-old woman who had fought long and hard for the ERA. Bob had done a masterful job. In the end result, Beasley and the woman were seen to be emerging from a motel room. He looked like he'd been surprised by the photographer. She was beaming at him like someone so in love she didn't care. The two of them were holding hands. That had blown me away, that the machine could perfectly interlock their hands. Bob had laughed and called it kid stuff.

"You sonofabitch," Beasley growled.

"Save it," I said wearily.

I got up. As I left, I said over my shoulder, "Keep it honest and let the voters decide."

That evening I talked to Styles. He was back in Washington. I told him what I'd done and asked him if he wanted a written report.

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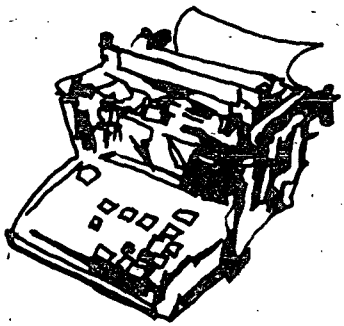
He said no, just send the bill. I told him he'd also be getting a bill from Capitol Lasergraphics and how much it would be. He groaned, but said that it'd be worth it if Beasley played fair, because then there was no way he could win.

"If all goes well," he said, "you should get that little bonus in time for Christmas. You did a good job, Swift. I'll remember that. Though I must admit this thing cost me rather a bit."

"Congressman," I said, "believe me. It cost me, too."



TOO BAD HER NAME WASN'T QUILLA

by RENA GARTER KUNIS

The deceased left a clue,
As deceaseds sometimes do:
An O in his blood on the wall.
Said the clever detective
In a manner reflective,
"The culprit is no one at all."
And Olga O'Dare,
The deceased's only heir,
With her ill-gotten gains had a ball.

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a distinguished reprint by

URSULA CURTISS

Last year, Dodd, Mead published a collection of thirteen stories by Ursula Curtiss, The House on Plymouth Street and Other Stories, *with a lovely Introduction by the author's sister Mary McMullen (herself a well known writer of suspense) which adds greatly to the enjoyment and value of the book. She begins her recollections of her sister by saying, "I shall make no comment on her books and stories. They speak, whisper, and sing for themselves." As does "The House on Plymouth Street" indeed speak, whisper, and sing for itself . . .*

THE HOUSE ON PLYMOUTH STREET

by URSULA CURTISS

She had found the house by herself, that cold October day in the quiet countryside south of Boston.

The two-chimneyed white clapboard house, shuttered in grey and clearly very old, had a settled air as it stood on its slight rise well back from the road under elms. Mrs. Tyrell did not have the boldness to knock on doors and ask about properties for sale—but here there was a tall young girl, bundled into a blue parka and raking desultorily under a bronze-gold burn of hickory tree in a corner near the road.

Mrs. Tyrell had Bonnet with her, the large Airedale of whom the current babysitter was ridiculously afraid, but not his leash. She

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closed the car door against his expectant whiskers and approached the girl, who leaned on the rake and watched her come.

For her age, somewhere in the midteens, she had a colorless and surprisingly dreary face. "Hello," said Mrs. Tyrell, against her will as sprightly as a dental nurse. "My husband and I are house hunting around here—Cresset seems like a very pretty town—and I wondered if by any chance you knew of a place for sale with a few acres?"

Something wrong about the eyes, as if the light blue irises had mended imperfectly after a shattering. Retarded, thought Mrs. Tyrell with the twist at the heart of any woman with two healthy, clear-gazing children. And not all that young: at least nineteen or possibly twenty.

"I'll ask my mother," said the girl, letting the rake fall into the pile of brown leaves, and began to walk toward the house before Mrs. Tyrell could demur.

Which she had intended to do, she realized bemusedly fifteen minutes later. "Oh, no, please don't bother" would have been off the tip of her tongue if there had been even a half second to spare.

Diners occasionally bit down on a pearl along with the oyster, somebody always won the Irish Sweepstakes—and this place, with six acres that included a stretch of woods, was for sale at approximately the price the Tyrells had been prepared to pay.

The woman, who introduced herself as Helen Wadsworth, delivered the information with some reluctance, standing on the walk and gripping a coat about her in the biting air. "It's all been very unexpected. My husband's company transferred him out to the West Coast with practically no warning and the house isn't quite in condition to be shown yet. If you'd like to come back later on in the week—"

Mrs. Tyrell, looking at the cold yet handsome features, almost challengingly bare of makeup and framed in dark hair with uncompromising threads of grey, was sure that this was no coy reference to unwashed lunch dishes or a day's delay in the dusting of table tops. Equally, standing so close to the front door, which had a great burst of honeysuckle beside it, she was convinced that if she drove away she would return to find that the house had been snapped up in her absence.

She said cajolingly, "Mrs. Wadsworth, I've looked at so many houses in the last couple of months that I've stopped seeing anything

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but the absolute basics. I'm not shopping, honestly. We know exactly what we want, so I'd only take up a few minutes of your time."

It was far more than that.

Mrs. Wadsworth opened the door, stepped aside, followed her visitor over the threshold, said after a second's hesitation, "Excuse me," and walked rapidly deeper into the house. Mrs. Tyrell, who had absorbed with delight the wide floorboards, the deep fireplace, the views through five crisply white-silled windows, listened unabashedly.

She heard sounds from a refrigerator and then the snap and rustle of a paper bag and, "Why don't you take these over to Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins? I'm sure they skip lunch if nobody reminds them."

More order than suggestion, it was acted upon at once. Mrs. Tyrell was obscurely relieved at the faint click of a door latch. Mrs. Wadsworth, coming back, said briefly, "My daughter knows I'm selling the house, of course, but not how soon. Well, this is the living room, obviously—"

If she had been honest about the state of the house, and almost every room was in some degree of upheaval, Mrs. Tyrell had been equally truthful. Weeks of viewing had trained her eye to forget paint, strip off wallpaper, empty out furniture so that only the underlying space and proportions remained.

Downstairs, along with the dining room—also fireplaced—and kitchen, still warmly scented, were the master bedroom and bath and a slip of a room, which would accommodate three-month-old Damon comfortably for some time to come. Upstairs—Mrs. Tyrell deferred the attached barn for the moment; in her mind it would be of interest chiefly to Neil and perhaps five-year-old Annie—were a corner bedroom with fireplace, bath, and a very large guest room with a trestle table against one wall. A door at its back opened on a long narrow attic.

It was an accepted fact that real-estate agents preferred not to have owners on hand. In their eagerness owners were prone to such utterances as, "We just love this place, we wouldn't dream of selling if the doctor hadn't insisted on a drier climate for my wife's arthritis."

They need not, thought Mrs. Tyrell, have worried about this owner. Mrs. Wadsworth, opening doors, was as noncommittal as if judging strange territory herself. It was a surprise when she said, apparently of the trestle table, "My mother lived with us when we first came here, and raised African violets, but then she moved to Dedham." For some reason, it sounded like mischievous incising on

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a tombstone. They were standing on the upper landing. Mrs. Tyrell glanced curiously at the other woman and then craned out the window at the sound of a nasal bawl.

"That's the Pattillos' calf, next door." Mrs. Wadsworth nodded at a trim red barn visible beyond trees. "They're from New York. At one time they had pigs and turkeys, too—living off the land was the idea, I suppose, although you'd never know it to look at them." Now a corner of the marble mouth did flick up—in amusement? mild contempt? "Since then they've opened a gift-and-book shop and only raise one calf at a time and keep a few chickens. We get all our eggs there."

Back to business. "Would you like to see the barn?"

Mrs. Tyrell didn't really care about the barn—she had made up her mind even before mounting the stairs that they must have this house—but she said yes because Neil would want all the details when she called him in London. "First, though, I have our dog in the car. I ought to let him—"

"I'd much rather you didn't," said Mrs. Wadsworth, pleasant but edged. "My daughter is extremely allergic. Oh, I know, there are dogs just down the road, and in fact when Nancy feels that one of us needs punishing she goes there and exposes herself deliberately. It's days, sometimes a week or more, before she can breathe easily without pills."

It was stated without rancor or even censure, as a lived-with fact of life. "I can't stop her, and I can't control stray dogs, but I do do what I can."

"I can certainly see that," said Mrs. Tyrell with a pang at the vision of the pale, joyless face. "I'll be quick, then."

The barn, its sliding door closed on a grey Ford, its only source of sunlight two small windows high up in the loft area, was extremely cold. In addition to the expectable tools and paint cans, it housed a gas-powered garden tiller and a riding lawn mower at which Mrs. Tyrell cast an ignorant but speculative eye. There was close to a half acre of grass in front and a deep swath in back before the field, separated by dwarf fruit trees, gave way to woods.

At the rear of the barn, a Dutch door ajar on a wooden ramp led down into a stable area, which Mrs. Tyrell, by now shivering, declined to investigate. Nor was there any point in her looking at the cellar. The furnace (gas, she learned) was obviously working, and she wouldn't have known what else to ask about.

As they walked back along the passage to the kitchen, Mrs. Tyrell

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said that in her husband's absence abroad, and as a formality, she would like his uncle to see the house. Would tomorrow morning be convenient?

"Certainly," said Mrs. Wadsworth. That would give her time to locate the appraisal and the builder's report, the bill of sale and maintenance contract for the new electric pump—all the cellars in older houses in this area had water in them during the spring—and any other relevant documents from their own purchase a year ago.

Her air of calm indifference worried Mrs. Tyrell. What if she were already finding this paper search a nuisance and planning to sell instead to a friend who already knew the particulars? Fingers nervous with the momentousness of the occasion, she wrote a check for $100, adding on the line provided, "Binder on 849 Plymouth Street." Mrs. Wadsworth wrote her a receipt.

A growing awareness of Bonnet's undoubted predicament in the car kept Mrs. Tyrell's further queries to a minimum. She and Neil had already acquired information about schools in a number of South Shore towns, Cresset among them. She noted down the amount of the mortgage and the bank that held it, the taxes, and—Neil would be proud of her—the zoning.

At the kitchen door, she turned for a final glance out at the distant woods, a weave of deep grey stitched here and there with red and yellow. She said compulsively, "I hope your daughter won't mind too much."

"Oh, no. Nancy is actually very fond of her stepfather. It's the idea of having to make new friends," said Mrs. Wadsworth in a forthright way, "but she'll adjust."

Mrs. Tyrell walked to the car, then drove away at a slow cruise, looking for a safe place to let Bonnet out. She passed the Pattillos' house, shingled in smoke-colored cedar, and, farther along on the opposite side of the road, the dogs Mrs. Wadsworth had mentioned: a pair of Dobermans coming alertly to their haunches in deep grass at the tentative sound of the car engine. Presumably, they guarded a remodeling in progress at the corner, although at the moment there was no sign of workmen. Mrs. Tyrell, contemplating the long watchful heads and sculptured muscles, was glad of the chain-link fence: Annie, having grown up with an Airedale, had an innocent trust in all dogs.

A right turn onto a road drifted with yellow leaves presently provided a clearing at the edge of a woods for Bonnet. Part of *their* woods, Mrs. Tyrell realized with pleased surprise. A few minutes

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later, putting off an inspection of the town center because she had told the babysitter she would be back by four, she was on her way home.

Damon slept unconcernedly in his crib, fortified by a gourmet meal of formula and saltless strained squash. Annie, as rosy-gold as he was dark, knew all about her mother's quest and was full of excited questions. Stalled by "I think so, but we'll see," she sat on the edge of a chair while the call to London was put in.

Mrs. Tyrell had done some concentrated thinking on the return trip. It was probably true that the house would still be available when Neil returned in just under two weeks. A lot of people didn't want that much space, inside or out, or automatically distrusted anything two hundred years old, or, increasingly, preferred to huddle in the elbow-reach safety of a development.

But it was equally true that any real-estate agent who got wind of what was going on would urge upon Mrs. Wadsworth some judicious painting and grounds-manicuring. An outlay of perhaps five hundred dollars would be reflected in a two-thousand-dollar increase in the asking price.

Neil, given a detailed description, agreed. They were totally at one about the kind of house and surroundings they wanted, which was why he had left countersigned checks on a joint money account.

"You really like it, don't you?"

"Oh, Neil. Remember that place in Cohasset we thought about but it was at the far end of nowhere? It doesn't *compare* with this."

From the particular to the general—the children, the conference, the London weather. The barman at the Little Mayfair remembered Mrs. Tyrell from a trip made when Annie was three and had asked about her. Then: "Have Charlie take a look at the house before you sign, will you?"

"I was going to. Say hello to Annie, she's sitting here like an image, and I'll call and let you know."

Charlie Tyrell was Neil's uncle, blithely retired at sixty from a number of successful careers, including one as builder. He would know all about the points of stress in an old house, septic tanks, and other exotica. Reached at seven o'clock that evening, he said that he would be delighted to drive down to Cresset the next morning but that he had an unbreakable appointment in Boston at one, so what about taking two cars?

In the morning, Annie pleaded to go along. She was an extraor-

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dinarily good and companionable child, but even the best of five-year-olds could grow difficult with fatigue, and Mrs. Tyrell promised to bring back a picture instead. "It's just going to be long business talks and there wouldn't be anything for you to do. Besides, you have to be here to see that Bonnet is very polite to Miss Coates." Both of these arguments had validity. Under them was something of which Mrs. Tyrell was so ashamed that she covered it up swiftly, even to herself.

She was not surprised to see Charlie's rakish dark-green Jaguar there ahead of her on Plymouth Street—it was his habit to drive as though headed for the next pit stop. She had braced herself for a feeling of letdown, even of severe doubt, at this second view of the house. Instead, she took in with appreciation and the pride of near-ownership details that hadn't registered exactly before: the separate front door, which opened directly onto the stairs, and the black banding of the white chimneys—to keep out witches, according to one New England legend.

Nancy let her in. The hair congealed by the parka's hood the day before was in thick glossy dark braids, wiping away two or three years, and her rather heavy face shone so from soap and water that it took on a faint glow from the cherry pullover she wore with jeans.

She dropped into a chair with no accompanying invitation. "My mother said to tell you they're down in the cellar."

"I'd only get in the way," said Mrs. Tyrell, compromising on an arm of the couch, "so I think I'll wait here if you don't mind."

The starred gaze riveted itself upon her with open curiosity. "Did you bring your dog?"

"No, he isn't really fond of the car." It was a lie, which would have made Bonnet grieve into his whiskers.

Feet could be heard below, crunching on cement and then mounting the stairs, which led up to the door in the dining room. Nancy frowned at the rug as if, having used up her two utterances in prodigal fashion, she did not know what to do next. Her brow cleared with relief. She said, firm and confiding, "I'll like California."

"I'm sure you will." Again Mrs. Tyrell felt a wrench of compassion; this had been dinned into the girl like letters of the alphabet. "I've only been to San Francisco, but it's a beautiful—"

The cellar door had opened, and now Mrs. Wadsworth and Neil's uncle were in the room with greetings. "Sound as a nut," remarked Charlie of the house's underpinnings. Lean and weathered, with a debonair little grey mustache, he looked like a man who enjoyed

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life. The glance he shot at Mrs. Tyrell said that although professional caution was going to keep him from any real encomiums, he approved wholeheartedly of the venture.

"Nancy dear—" Mrs. Wadsworth was almost unrecognizable from yesterday afternoon in a dark wool dress with a strand of pearls, her chiseled lips the palest of rose "—have you picked up your room? Mr. Tyrell has seen all of the downstairs and the barn, but I'm sure he'll want—"

"No housework necessary," said Charlie, smiling at Nancy—too late. Obediently on her feet, she headed for the door of what would be Damon's abode and disappeared.

"Now—" With a gesture at the couch that included both her visitors, Mrs. Wadsworth sat down in a chair beside a low table and picked up papers and a bankbook. Her left hand wore a diamond like a diminished ice cube. "I talked to my husband last night and he said that although there'll have to be a title search, these would serve as proof of ownership . . ."

The business discussion that Mrs. Tyrell had described that morning to Annie had begun. The terminology now falling on the air was enough to damp any real excitement, but the wheels were in motion and she was grateful for Charlie's expertise.

She emerged from a semi-daydream about living-room curtains to discover Charlie looking purposefully at his watch. It was the time of late morning when he liked someone to approach him with a Bloody Mary, and Mrs. Tyrell herself would have accepted one with alacrity, but any such offer here was unlikely as the sudden appearance of a marching band.

Instead of suggesting any adjournment, however, Charlie asked if he could use the telephone—and came back with an air of almost hand-rubbing enjoyment that could only have sprung from the deferral of his unbreakable appointment. If he hurried his exploration of the upstairs, he said, and if Mrs. Wadsworth thought he could be of any help, there would be time for him to go with her to the title company.

Mrs. Tyrell had a sensation of being picked up and swept along, but delightfully so. Although he was fond of his nephew, and by extension his nephew's wife, Charles Haywood Tyrell, widower for a dozen years, was not a man to discommode himself except in what he considered to be an extremely good cause.

It was a bare twenty-five minutes later that, having handed Mrs. Wadsworth out of the Jaguar in front of the title company office—it

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was his plan to proceed directly to Boston from there, leaving Mrs. Tyrell to do the chauffeuring back to Plymouth Street—he said kindly, "I have all the figures you gave me, and you don't sign anything until the closing. Look around, why don't you, and meet us here in half an hour?"

Cresset was not the kind of town in which all business was conducted behind Colonial fronts, but its tree-lined residential side streets opened up cleanly on a long and curving main street whose sidewalks would also be shaded in summer. In Mrs. Tyrell's immediate radius were a flower shop, a grocery-plus-liquor store, a pair of discreetly curtained windows which said Dressmaking on one side and Alterations on the other—and, just beyond those, two wooden signs, creaking in the wind and separated by a single entrance. Books. Gifts.

The Pattillos, the ex-New Yorkers who would be their neighbors. Mrs. Tyrell opened the door and went in.

It was a deep, pleasant place, ivory-walled, divided for three-quarters of its length by Wedgwood-blue lattice work supporting occasional vines and hung at intervals with odd items: a saucy black Raggedy Ann, a bath sheet with hearts and flowers around an embroidered "Ours," a webbed golden bag holding the sparkle of two champagne glasses.

There were customers on both sides. Mrs. Tyrell devoted herself to a revolving stand of earrings in the gift area and bided her time.

A few feet away, a large woman in a toggle coat was debating over a pair of crystal salt and pepper shakers.

"They're awfully small."

"They are delicate, aren't they?"

The second speaker was presumably Mrs. Pattillo, small and lithe in what were probably designer jeans, well faded, with a turtlenecked burgundy top. Her short bell of hair was like mushroom silk, her makeup frankly and entertainingly just a brush of silver on her eyelids, lashes like tiny black whisk brooms, lipstick the color of rose wine.

The toggle-coated woman made her purchase. Mrs. Tyrell turned with a pair of dangling glass triangles. She said, "I'd like these, if I may," and introduced herself. "We're buying the Wadsworth house, and I thought it would be nice to come in and meet you."

Mrs. Pattillo's eyebrows flew up. "Really? Let me call Donald,

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he'll be thrilled. I'm Tracy, by the way, like twenty-three million other females born that year. Donald? Come over here a sec."

The man who sauntered around the end of the lattice work was tall but as supple as his wife, with fiery dark eyes and a short, immaculately clipped black beard. He said when he had welcomed Mrs. Tyrell, "Well, that was fast. We didn't even know anyone was looking at the house."

Mrs. Tyrell explained the unlikely dovetailing of circumstances. "It's expediting matters that Mrs. Wadsworth is anxious to join her husband out on the Coast."

Neither of the Pattillos turned a head or even a hair, but something passed alertly between them. The customer, patchily visible on the bookshop side, uttered the kind of cough that spoke of patience wearing thin, and Pattillo excused himself. Mrs. Tyrell paid for her earrings and departed thoughtfully.

"You're in luck," said Charlie in an aside five minutes later. "The house is in her name, so there won't be any delay. The closing will be the day after tomorrow, and I think you've got a gem."

Mrs. Tyrell had known it, but it was nice to have his seasoned endorsement. Her swift and second trip upstairs had revealed two bonus details—an extra linen closet and the fact that the attic had a narrow back stairway. Dormer-windowed on both sides, it could be painted and turned to other purposes if they decided to use the barn for storage instead.

Charlie sped off in his Jaguar and Mrs. Tyrell drove Mrs. Wadsworth back to Plymouth Street. Apart from, "Mr. Tyrell was so kind and very helpful," her passenger had nothing to offer. She was clearly not a woman of small talk—still, the car seemed to buzz actively with silence.

The Dobermans were not quiet today. They raced and ranged behind the chain links like a pair of powerful whips, growling with the collected menace of thunder before erupting into sound. As if afraid they would give a buyer pause, Mrs. Wadsworth said, "They never do that at night. I think children poke sticks in at them, just because the fence is there."

And then, astonishingly, "Will you come in and have a drink? This has all been so— I could certainly use one."

An explanation of the startling offer wasn't long in coming. The house breathed emptiness at them when Mrs. Wadsworth used her key. She asked if Scotch would be all right and came back with two glasses clinking lightly with ice. When she had sat down, she said,

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staring with fixity through one of the windows that overlooked the front lawn, "I didn't talk to my husband last night. I haven't the slightest idea where he is. He's left me."

Mrs. Tyrell, who had been geared to something more in the way of a toast, thought transfixedly that her Scotch was going to go down the wrong way. She managed, "Oh?"

Mrs. Wadsworth acknowledged this choked syllable with a certain aloofness of her own. "It isn't the kind of thing one cares to advertise from the rooftops, but the Pattillos will undoubtedly tell you and I thought you might as well hear it from the source."

She was remembering the interval at the title company. Mrs. Tyrell was irritated at the rush of warmth to her face, as if a perfectly natural interest in neighbors-to-be had suddenly turned into snooping.

"My husband is a few years younger than I am and very attractive to women. I accused him of an affair, perhaps wrongly—" into Mrs. Tyrell's head flashed an image of silvery eyelids and clear-rose lips "—and there was a quarrel. We were outside at the time and I imagine it was highly audible next door."

Hard to imagine the composed voice raised, and only possible to guess from the measure of rigidity how much this was costing her. "It wasn't the first such quarrel, naturally, but it turned out to be the last. Even if I could manage a place like this by myself, which I can't, I wouldn't care to stay on in Cresset."

No, thought Mrs. Tyrell—in spite of changing standards, it would be intolerable for a woman like Mrs. Wadsworth. There were a few poisoned tongues in any town, and it was even possible that Nancy would be speculated about as a cause of dissension. She said simply, "I'm sorry," and Mrs. Wadsworth dismissed that with a shrug and a remote smile.

"The California part is true, anyway. I do have friends there." Then, with understandable brusqueness—privacy unlocked for casual inspection by a stranger—"Unless there's anything here you want, I'm going to put up a Garage Sale notice this afternoon and get rid of everything."

And, unspoken, make a fresh, stripped-bare start. Mrs. Tyrell finished her drink and rose. She said, making the allusion with a trace of awkwardness, "I'll ask my husband about the lawn mower and garden tiller. How much are you asking?"

She had started the car before she remembered the picture prom-

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ised to Annie. She got out again and snapped it, inspected the Polaroid print, and then drove off.

"I think children poke sticks in at them," Mrs. Wadsworth had said of the Dobermans—but it was Nancy who was doing just that. At the sight of the recognized car, she averted her face as though oblivious and dropped her prod in the same way she had let the rake fall to the ground, although Mrs. Tyrell could have sworn that she saw a flash of silver at the prod's head.

It was not an incident worth notice—unless the dogs ever got loose and had a chance at their tormentor. The very young, and Nancy certainly qualified as that whatever her chronological age, liked to provoke reaction for its own sake; there needn't be intentional cruelty involved.

Still, Mrs. Tyrell wished that she hadn't seen it.

Annie was rapt at the photographed pair of upstairs windows that would be hers. Standing in the small back garden, which in summer supported three tomato plants, a rosebush, a dwarf peach tree, and a row of hollyhocks, she gazed around her with daring. "Is it five times as big as this?"

How to explain acreage in terms a child would understand? "This would all fit in half the front lawn," said Mrs. Tyrell.

From then on, it was an afternoon of telephoning. First Neil in London. The conference was being cut short because its president had collapsed and died of a heart attack in the small hours, so that he would be home in six days. He said yes to the mower and tiller—"I don't want to spend all my weekends looking like the *Man With a Hoe*"—and, "Better call the storage place, our stuff may be at the bottom of the heap, and get hold of Bill McGinnis."

The stuff was antique furniture left to him by a great-aunt, for most of which there had been no room in this little starter house. Bill McGinnis, a colleague of Neil's, was their own would-be house buyer.

Mrs. Tyrell was far too excited to read after dinner. She watched a made-for-television suspense movie instead, and that was a mistake. Perhaps because there had been rain tapping at the cellar window, which was the camera's frequent and suggestive focus, and there was now real rain driving against the window at one side of her bed, she came awake with a single stark question in her mind.

What if Mrs. Wadsworth's second version of her husband's abrupt and permanent departure had been as false as the first, with an air of forced-out truth simply because it had come second?

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That could mean that he had never left at all. Not—upright, at least.

The question, having sidled in, settled down and gave birth to a few ugly young.

Marital quarrels frequently ended in violence rather than a mere walking out. A sharp signal had passed between the Pattillos at the mention of transferal to the West Coast. Mrs. Wadsworth was a strong woman, but even so—

There were two vehicles in the barn.

At this point, savingly, an imaginary voice said in the portentous tones of a low-budget-film sheriff, "Fan out, men. I want every square foot of these woods examined for signs of recent disturbance."

Mrs. Tyrell switched on the bedside light. It was four-thirty, and although Damon was inching toward a more civilized hour he would soon be demanding his bottle. She got up and put it on to heat, eager as much for his company as for purposes of circumvention. Presently, his tiny hands curled with pleasure and, his perfect, threadlike black eyebrows registering little flickers of which only he knew the cause, he was sanity made absolute.

The closing went off without incident on a cold and soaking day. For an occasion of such import, it was surprisingly brisk and brief—perhaps, thought Mrs. Tyrell, not unlike getting married at city hall. When they were all on their feet, one of the spectacled men said to Mrs. Wadsworth with a glance out at the glistening street, "I'll bet this rain and cold makes you look forward to sunny California."

"Yes, I must confess it does."

"Roy likes it out there, does he?"

"Oh, very much," said Mrs. Wadsworth.

It had been agreed that she and Nancy would be out of the house by three o'clock on Sunday, leaving the second set of keys on the living-room mantel. Although it wasn't a day to linger in the open, Mrs. Tyrell held out her hand. "I won't be seeing you again, so goodbye and good luck."

"The same to you, and thank you for being—discreet." Mrs. Wadsworth hesitated a moment in spite of the rain. "If you happen to meet a couple called Hopkins, it's all right—they know, too."

Mrs. Tyrell had turned her ignition key when there was a tap on the car window: Tracy Pattillo, looking like an exotic child in yellow oilskins. "Does this mean the deed is done?"

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"Yes, I'm going to start bringing things down on Sunday."

And that was the day when, even enjoined by Saturday's six o'clock news, she had forgotten to adjust her clock.

She brought the entire household with her: Annie, Damon in a bassinet, and Bonnet. It was finally the kind of day that October was supposed to bring—crisp, leaf-scented, with an occasional chase of white clouds across a sky of brilliant blue.

The barn stood open and empty. Damon was oblivious in his nest on the back seat. Leave him, for the moment; warm and fed and lulled by the trip, he was in the deepest part of his afternoon sleep. Mrs. Tyrell closed the car door gently, walked across the lawn to where Annie and the Airedale waited, and used the front-door key for the first time.

The living room, now furnished only with a shift of tree shadows on walls and floorboards, seemed to have grown in size. It greeted them with a warm, familiar aroma—poultry seasoning? Maybe the quarrel hadn't been about a woman at all, thought Mrs. Tyrell, giddy with ownership; maybe it had started out with, "Do you have to put that damned stuff in everything?"

And there with suddenness in the doorway to the dining room, causing a fast slam of fear in the throat because she had come so silently, was Mrs. Wadsworth.

She had undergone another of her transformations and wore trim grey slacks and an open-necked white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. "Mrs. Tyrell. I thought when I heard the car that you were Nancy. She's doing a few last-minute errands and we'll be ready to leave as soon as she gets back." She added pointedly, "It *is* only two o'clock."

Mrs. Tyrell, her error explained to her, felt strangely stung and self-conscious. "I'm so sorry, I don't know how I did that. I've brought a few things to put in the barn, and then we'll be around outside. Please, take your time."

Mrs. Wadsworth had retreated a step into the dining room when she said with sharpness, "Your dog."

Bonnet, having completed a speedy investigation of the bedroom to the left of the hall, was advancing toward them on his tightly fleeced, pillary brown legs.

Mrs. Tyrell checked him with a hand on his collar. Two days ago, before she had seen Nancy at the fence with the cane, she would have offered to incarcerate him until the Wadsworths' departure.

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Now she said, "I'll see that he stays with us," and ushered them all out the door.

Bonnet rushed off at once to search for a stick—an otherwise mature six, he lost his head at the sight of any kind of running space. Damon hadn't stirred. Mrs. Tyrell opened the trunk, and between them she and Annie carried brushes, an old sheet, and cans of paint—a glowing white to replace the living room's yellowing cream—into the barn.

Annie was captivated by the echoing hollowness and the smells of earth, old wood, long-gone hay. She called from the stable area, "Did the horse live here?"

"Once, I suppose." Mrs. Tyrell walked down the ramp toward where the child had positioned herself solemnly at the back of a stall, as if to get a horse's-eye view of things. "We have to go outside a while, Annie, until the people leave."

Annie's navy coat was caught on what turned out to be a nail. Mrs. Tyrell freed her, heard the lightest of sounds from the layering of dusty straw, and put a hand to her ear. She had considered the glass triangles somehow appropriate for this day, and one of them had dropped off.

She was fond of the earrings, which shone with icy clarity inside the curve of her hair, once the color of Annie's but now turning darker. She moved the straw carefully and experimentally with the tip of her shoe—glass would drink up and reflect even this filtered light.

But what she was looking at, and what gradually revealed itself to be a great stain, almost torso-sized, was blood. Not very old blood, because it was still readily identifiable as such.

The bottom half of the stable door clicked shut. "He was going to do something dreadful to my daughter," said Mrs. Wadsworth, standing behind it. There hadn't even been a warning gather of drum rolls; she was simply there. "Just because she got out of temper and tried to— He was going to put her away."

At the first words, the past-tense words, Mrs. Tyrell had reached for and was gripping Annie's hand; it shivered through her head like lightning that unless Mrs. Wadsworth had gone right up to the car she couldn't know Damon was there. The same flash showed her the source of the shame she hadn't wanted to examine before. Mixed with her compassion, from the first, had been a slight recoil from Nancy. Had the similarity of names troubled her? Certainly she had

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not wanted her child exposed to the flawed gaze, which, translated into terms of sound, would be a steady, busy drill.

Not retarded, but unbalanced and dangerous.

As if she hadn't grasped what she had been told, Mrs. Tyrell got words past a heavy, hard-beating pulse. "My husband's uncle is meeting us here. In fact, I think—is that his car?"

Mrs. Wadsworth didn't trouble to turn her head. "Nancy will be twenty-one in the spring, and then she comes into the principal of her grandmother's inheritance— Such a dear little thing she was, when she was three. I couldn't have court-appointed people prying around after all these years."

The years when she had had control of the income—and the prospect of the years ahead. In consequence, the ultimate action taken, here in an old New England barn, with Mrs. Tyrell stumbling into it like a rabbit into a snare.

Her unconscious had suggested more than she knew during those rainy small hours. It presented her now with the trim red barn so readily to hand, its owners away all day, which undoubtedly contained things like cleavers, because who would cope with whole steers or pigs?

But then what had been done with Roy Wadsworth? Any extensive digging would soon betray itself in wet ground, and the Pattillos were already dubious about the transferal to the West Coast.

A remembered smell of poultry seasoning, not once but twice, mingled with a few remembered words and caught sickeningly at the back of Mrs. Tyrell's mouth. She said, taking a bold two steps closer to the stable door, "I haven't the slightest idea of what you're talking about, but whatever it is it has nothing to do with me. I'd like to show Annie the back, so—"

It had had to be tried, and of course it failed. Mrs. Wadsworth said in an appallingly conversational voice, "Nancy will be here any minute."

And if Nancy comes, if there are two of them, we are lost.

Mrs. Tyrell measured her as she imagined men in a fighting mood measured each other. She was outtopped by two inches and outweighed by about twenty pounds. And there was Annie, not quite comprehending but holding her hand very tightly, to think about.

And, in the car, Damon. So very small, so—disposable. Bassinet wicker burned up in a flash.

Mrs. Tyrell moved her gaze, craning for a view of the lawn. She saw Bonnet, beside the car and gnawing at a stick clasped between

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his forepaws even though nobody had played with him. She said with an air of vindictive triumph, "You'd better take away that thing my dog has before he runs out in the road with it."

The clear fear of a dog on these premises, with the according tale of severe allergy. How sure could a spur-of-the-moment killer be that the tidying had been complete?

Mrs. Wadsworth half spun and went crashing down against the tiller as Mrs. Tyrell, up the ramp in less than a blink, sent the stable door flying at her with the desperate strength of knowing that this chance could not be achieved again.

Her chest hurt. "Annie, run and get in the car, quick, and lock your door. —No, you don't," she gasped to Mrs. Wadsworth, struggling to rise with a beginning trickle of blood at one side of her chilly white forehead. *"No, you don't."*

She had never in her life inflicted deliberate harm on another human being, and even at this moment it was difficult to get down on one knee, seize the shirted shoulders, bang the grey-threaded dark head against metal with a force that terrified her. Then she was up and running across uneven planks—*dear God, don't let me trip*—toward sunlight.

She reached the car, shaking so that she had to wrench twice at the door, and somehow got in. With what felt like the last of her breath, she called to Bonnet who, believing that a game had finally begun, had pounced across the lawn.

And out of the barn came Mrs. Wadsworth, lurching, horrifying, with a lawn edger grasped like a javelin.

Leave Bonnet—after his years of nursemaiding Annie, his vigilant new station beside Damon's crib? Carry away the memory of the stick sprouting hopefully out either side of his whiskers?

"Bonnet, come!" shrieked Mrs. Tyrell, and at the last possible second he dropped the stick, bounded forward, and scrambled into the car.

By the sheerest providence and because the house had looked so empty, the keys dangled from the ignition. Mrs. Tyrell was backing without so much as a glance over her shoulder when the lawn edger struck the windshield with a force that would have cut flesh to the bone. Damon woke up and gave a tiny querulous bleat, but they were out of the driveway and safely on the road.

Annie said an awestricken, "Mama—" and Mrs. Tyrell said tensely, "Wait, Annie," because it took all her trembling concentration to reach the corner, turn right, pull off at the clearing beside

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the woods. (A single and necessary trip made to the Wadsworth part?)

Heart slowing somewhat, she looked at her child. Annie said, "Was that lady crazy?"

Mrs. Tyrell considered it with care. *Sick* was the gentler, more acceptable clinical term, but measles and mumps and chicken pox still lay in wait for a five-year-old who might wake in the night and think—

"Yes," she said. Murder for gain might be almost as prevalent as the common cold—but a private christening party, so that names could be used openly and with wicked amusement?

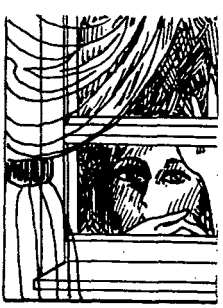
She waited at the clearing, engine running no matter what it might cost in gasoline because she did not dare take the smallest chance. Was it eight minutes or twelve or fifteen before the grey Ford appeared, Nancy at the wheel, and angled south?

Mrs. Tyrell memorized the license plate, but she did not go immediately in search of a telephone. Instead, although she was now quite sure of what Nancy had been doing with the cane, she made a last visit to the deep grass behind the chain-link fence.

She got out of the car. She said flinchingly to the Dobermans, side by side ten feet away, at once alert and lazy on their forefeet, "Mr. Hopkins?" and then, "Mrs. Hopkins?"

And, eyes sharpening to a terrible expectancy, they came.

She was certain, now, how Mrs. Wadsworth had disposed of her husband's remains.



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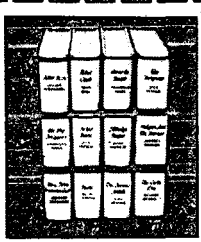

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Had to head instead for the nearby swamp
Afoot and toting his bag of loot,
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He soon attained the welcoming shades
Of the damp and gloomy Everglades,
And he might have made his escape somehow
When suddenly blocked by an open slough
Whose water seemed very deep to him
For Cecil had never learned to swim.
The slough, however, was not so wide
(Fourteen feet from side to side),
So Cecil leaped to a fallen log
As a stepping stone to cross the bog,
And learned, alas, but a moment later,
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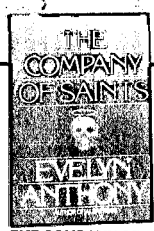

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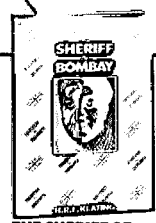

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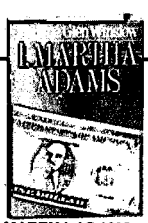

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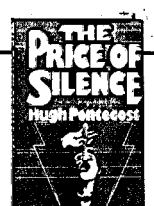

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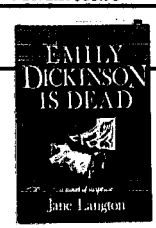

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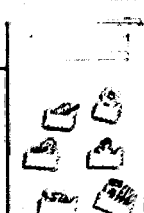

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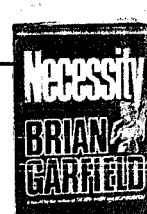

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